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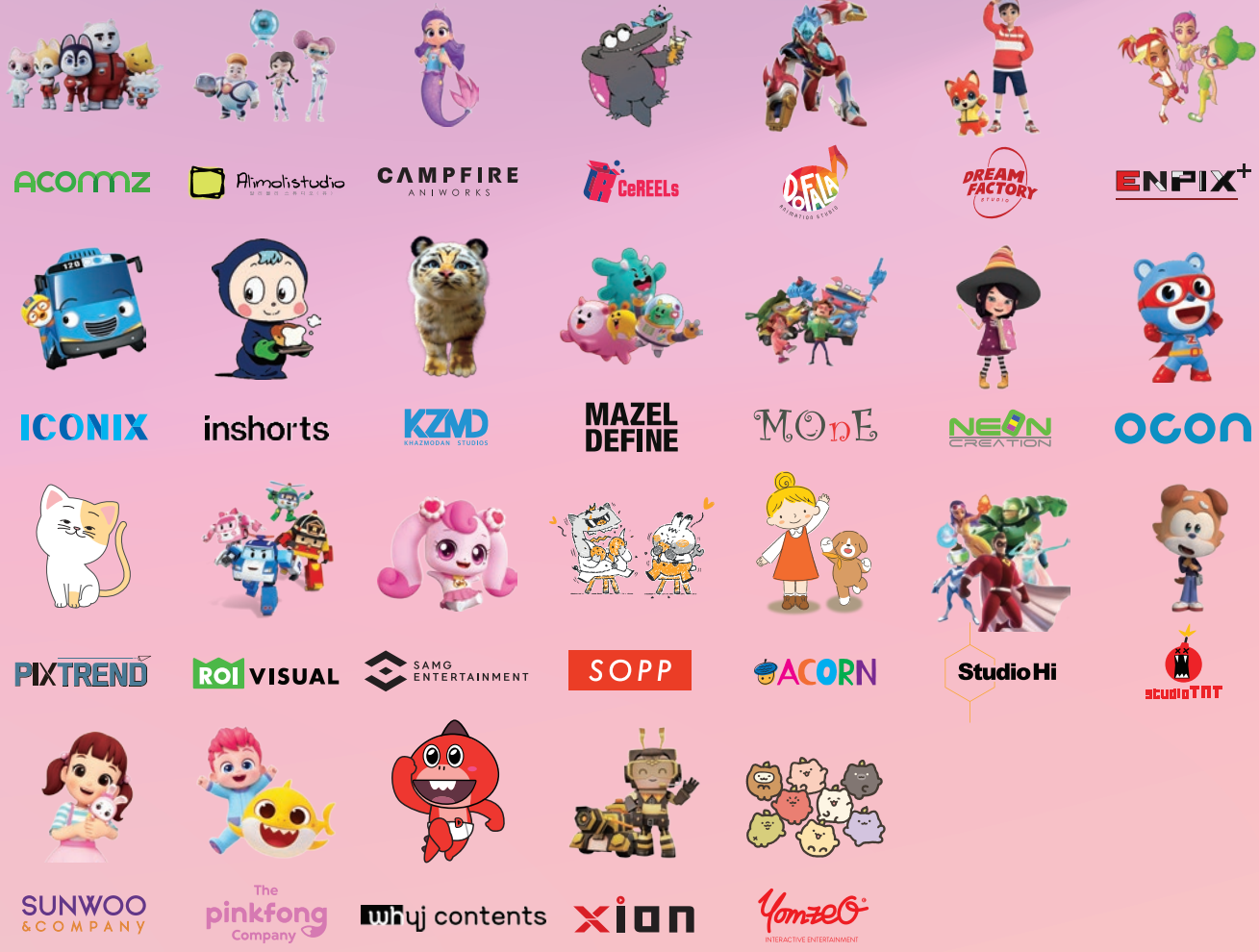

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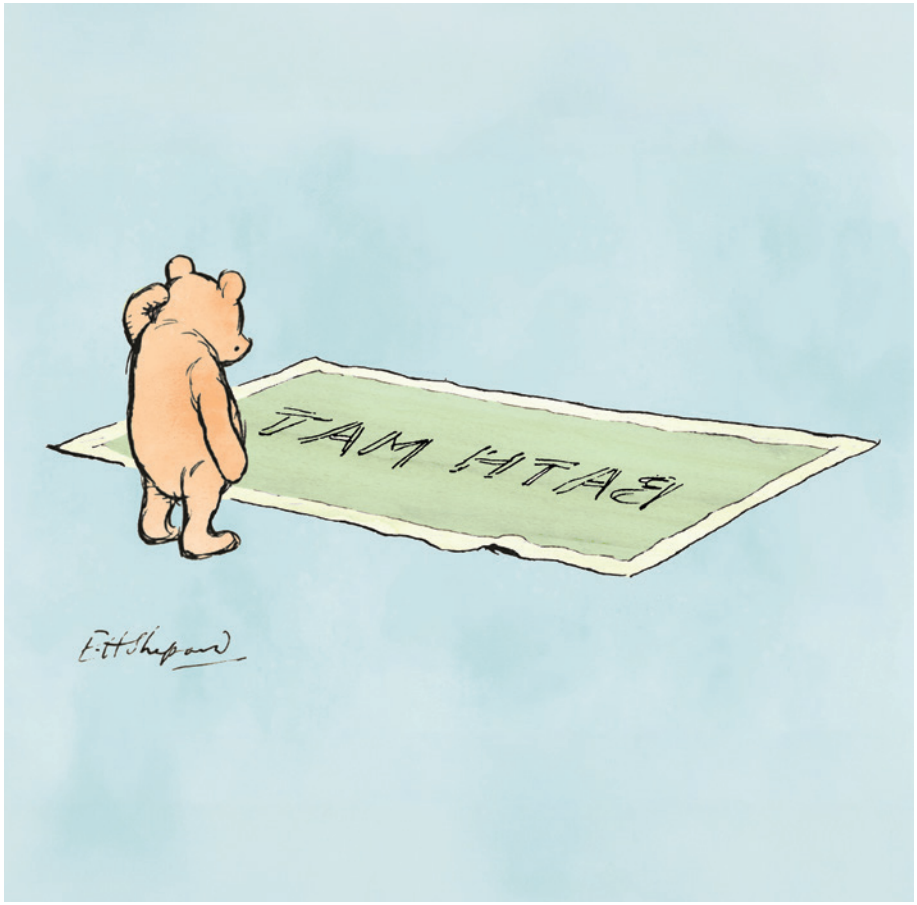

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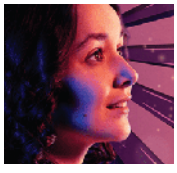

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Fresh eyes

For more than half a century, there have been "no trespassing" signs around the fictional Hundred Acre Wood—the home of Winnie-the-Pooh and his friends—preventing curious TV producers, film executives and animators from putting their own spin on the "bear of very little brain." Until recently, the rights acquired by The Walt Disney Company in 1961 from the estate of author A. A. Milne have prevented other production companies from creating their own Pooh-based projects. But that exclusive license expired in January 2022, putting the IP into the American public domain.

In an article on page 21, *Kidscreen*'s Sadhana Bharanidharan looks at two new interpretations of Pooh and takes a deeper dive into the enticing "hunny pot" of public-domain properties. While it's easy to understand why businesses are attracted to reviving well-known IPs—especially in this current economic climate when it's harder to finance and sell shows based on original content—there are times when the industry should perhaps stop and ask itself: "Just because we can adapt something, should we?"

It's one thing to revisit Pooh—a character created with children in mind. It's a completely different thing to take an adult novel about lust, obsession, possession, revenge, torture and murder written at the beginning of the 20th century and develop it into a YA movie franchise. But that seems to be what Disney is doing with a new project based on Gaston Leroux's novel *The Phantom of the Opera* that has been greenlit for development by Disney Branded Entertainment and Kenny Ortega.

When I first read about this, I was stunned. Maybe it's just because I'm new to the industry, but I just don't understand why anybody would even consider this source material viable for YA viewers in a post-Me Too era.

In the novel, singer Christine was the object of two men's desire: childhood friend Raoul (who has no adult relationship with Christine, but "loves" her anyway, and still somehow manages to impugn her honor) and the Phantom himself (who gaslights Christine, kidnaps her and forces her to agree to marriage under duress). Christine isn't even the narrator of her own story. It's not a tale of female agency—not even in the slightest.

I'm not saying that kids should be kept from classic literature. As a teen, I read works by Alexandre Dumas and Victor Hugo, but I knew they were going to be full of historical anachronisms and outdated attitudes. I'm also not saying that young adults shouldn't be shown stories about relationships—good, bad or problematic.

In fact, I'm saying the opposite—it's a positive thing for them to see what relationships can look like and the consequences they can inflict. However, I believe it's crucial to show these in a modern context, with sensibilities that reflect current thinking, not the baked-in attitudes that were common more than 100 years ago, when women and girls were viewed and treated very differently.

"But it's a Disney adaptation," I can hear my critics saying. "It's sure to be modernized and sanitized and made more palatable for today's audience." But at that point, what is it? It's not *Phantom*. It's a based-on-the-book-jacket adaptation riding on the coattails of a well-known brand whose modern popularity owes much to the Andrew Lloyd Webber musical. It's a Ship of Theseus with every plank replaced except a few character names. It's also a potentially huge project that eats up resources that could be devoted to creating an original IP—even a gothic romance in Paris, if Disney so desires.

Again, it comes down to the question: Just because an adaptation can be made, should it?

—Carolyn Gruske

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THE LIST

10 things on our radar this month

1 Unbundling the bundle

After publicly trading barbs for a couple of weeks, Disney and DirecTV finally reached a new carriage agreement last month that could set a precedent by giving consumers more bundled and unbundled content choices. Negotiations initially failed to lead to a mutually satisfactory deal, and Disney flexed by pulling its channels and streamers from the digital satellite service. But after a brief hiatus, they were restored when the companies settled their differences in mid-September.

Going forward, Disney has agreed to let DirecTV offer focused bundles featuring its platforms to 11.3 million Americans who subscribe to the service. One of these bundles will be a kids & family option for consumers who want that type of content without having to pay for a whole bunch of other stuff they won't watch. Disney's channels and streamers will also be available on an à la carte basis. Highlighting the flexibility of their "first-of-its-kind" agreement in a joint statement, the partners added that introducing slimmer bundles should appeal to customers who are tightening their belts. Will other companies follow suit in rethinking their traditional bundling strategies?

6

Investing in-house

Sony has a lack of original IPs, says president/COO Hiroki Totoki. His solution: A new multi-billion-dollar investment plan focused on movies and PlayStation. This strategy will also see Sony co-produce projects with streamer Crunchyroll, which releases nearly 200 anime titles each year.

7

Continue?

Video game profits are up, but layoffs are plaguing the wider industry. Statista data shows that developers have cut loose more than 22,000 employees in the past two years, as costs continue to rise and smaller studios are shuttering or consolidating faster than Sonic the Hedgehog runs.

2 No kids allowed

Australia's government has pledged to introduce legislation this year that's aimed at keeping kids off social media platforms, with an age-verification trial as its first step. And a more global reckoning is coming, with other countries such as the US and France planning their own bans and rules to try and put this technological genie back in the bottle.

3 Bah, humbug

One in three consumers are cutting down on holiday spending this year, according to Bankrate. Multiple years of inflation and other macroeconomic factors have taken a toll on 34% of shoppers and their wallets, says senior industry analyst Ted Rossman. Offsetting this purse-tightening are Gen Z parents (40%), who are expected to spend more this year on their growing families.

4 Taking AI(m)

Hunger Games producer Lionsgate is allowing tech company Runway to use its proprietary film/TV catalogue to train an AI model as a custom-built tool. It's a big move that may stir curiosity among competitors...and anxiety among creatives. Just a week before this announcement, an Animation Guild report warned that AI is endangering jobs in the industry, especially entry-level positions.

5 What's in your cart?

After testing real-world commerce in the metaverse with e.l.f. Cosmetics, Fandango and Walmart, Roblox is gearing up to take virtual shopping to the next level early next year, letting eligible creators and brands that are on Shopify sell physical items using real currency within Roblox games and experiences. This partnership could lay the groundwork for the future of immersive commerce.

8

Back to reality

Warner Bros. Discovery has doubled down on its tours and theme parks business—which operates the Wizarding World of Harry Potter attractions—by launching a new WBD Global Experiences division. CFO Gunnar Wiedenfels calls the company's experience business "a gift that keeps on giving."

9

Lights, camera, upgrade!

Theater chains in the US and Canada are making a US$2.2-billion bet to bolster moviegoing. AMC, Cineplex and six other companies have pledged to invest in modernization over the next three years, including upgrading their projection/sound systems, adding arcades and expanding food & beverage options.

10

Two-way racetrack

Encouraged by its growing tween fanbase, Formula 1 has raced into a major partnership with The LEGO Group. The toyco will roll out F1 building sets in 2025, along with broader plans to support the consumer products push with live LEGO activations at races and F1 content on LEGO's digital platforms.

CAKE's library, which already boasted 1,600 half hours of content including *Mush-Mush & the Mushables*, has doubled with the addition of Jetpack's titles

A new piece of CAKE

Picking up some of Jetpack's assets will help the well-known distributor/producer scale up to take on larger deals and expand its reach to the fringes of the kids & family market.

BY: CAROLYN GRUSKE

With an eye towards the future and an optimism about what they can achieve by working together, Dominic Gardiner and Ed Galton are doing their best to turn a bad situation into an opportunity for growth.

Gardiner was formerly CEO of Jetpack Distribution, a London-based company he founded in May 2014 and ran until this past August, when liquidators stepped in to dissolve the business (which owed approximately US$725,000 to creditors). At that time, Jetpack had seven employees and a catalogue of roughly 1,600 half hours of programming, including *Clangers* (104 x 11 minutes), *Talking Tom Heroes: Suddenly Super* (52 x 11 minutes) and *Kitty is not a Cat* (130 x 11 minutes).

Gardiner had been looking for a way to sell Jetpack to CAKE—another London-based distribution company that also operates a production arm—largely because of his friendship with Galton, its CEO. While that deal wasn't in the cards, Gardiner has still found himself partnering with his industry colleague, thanks to CAKE purchasing some of Jetpack's assets in a deal that was announced in September.

"We bought the naming rights of the business," explains Galton. "We bought all the data. We bought all of the information that comes with the sales organization. But what that meant was we had to go back and re-sign all of [Jetpack's] clients to new contracts, which is what we've done."

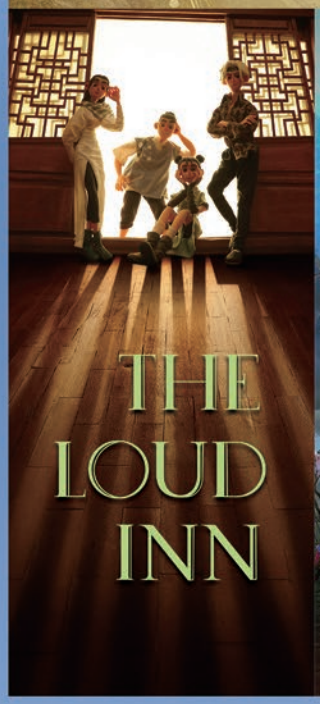
Joining forces

CAKE brought Gardiner on board as managing director of distribution, reporting directly to Galton. And the company also hired Jetpack's former sales manager Toby Jones as senior manager of sales. Jones will manage some territories, working alongside veteran sales director Julien Farçat and reporting to Gardiner.

Prior to the addition of Jetpack's catalogue, CAKE also had about 1,600 half hours to its name, including *Angry Birds* (a series and multiple one-shots), *Space Chickens in Space* (52 x 11 minutes) and *Mush-Mush & the Mushables* (96 x 11 minutes and four x 22 minutes). With double the amount of content to offer networks, broadcasters and streamers now, the revamped CAKE team is better prepared to compete and close deals, explains Galton.

The Jetpack partnership gives CAKE a much larger client base, he adds. "As a result, we'll be able to effectively do more deals on both sides, [CAKE and Jetpack]. There's a level of excitement here. At this time in the marketplace, you need scale to do some of the deals that are getting done, like some of the VOD deals that we were hesitant to do in the past because we didn't have as large of a catalogue to manage. We can do those deals now and really see some revenues come in from those types of arrangements."

Tencent Video Animation



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But being able to operate at a larger scale doesn't mean that the types of producers and shows CAKE is looking to represent will change, especially since Jetpack and CAKE always took a similar approach to finding content, says Gardiner.

"A lot of these shows are not huge commercial opportunities. Some of them are much, much smaller," he notes. "But I've always felt that if you're in the kids business, you've got to be developing and delivering content that is educationally enriching and is serving a kind of greater public need. It isn't just the commercial opportunity."

While not every show will sell everywhere, Gardiner says sometimes it's worth a shot. "You can find shows in Asia that only sell in Asia, and even though we're a distributor far, far away, it is something we should still consider because our business is delivering content from anywhere to anywhere. And having a bigger team enables us to spread our wings further."

In addition to selling clients' content, Gardiner is looking forward to being part of a company where production is embedded into the organization. He's also keen to follow new shows as they progress from development to production, and then on to distribution.

With even more content now in its library, the CAKE sales team will have to ensure that it treats all properties equally and without bias, says Galton. "We represent third parties, and we don't want them to feel like they're second-rate citizens. So the incentivization process of how the sales team benefits from sales they make is no different between the shows that CAKE is producing and third-party shows. A commission is a commission for the sales team, and we want them to be agnostic when they're in front of a client."

Talking Tom Heroes: Suddenly Super is one of the Jetpack shows that CAKE re-signed and will be promoting at MIPCOM

Future focus

Although CAKE is a much larger company asset-wise, the team of three dozen will continue to be careful about how it builds its portfolio.

"We never try to take on so much content that we're competing with ourselves," says Galton. "You'll never see CAKE launching six preschool shows at one time, where we'd be stumbling all over ourselves, because that doesn't make any sense. We'd not be doing any justice to the projects that we're representing. We want to make sure that whatever we put our name to is successful, so we bat a lot of projects away because: one, we don't feel they meet the standard that we feel is good for our brand; and two, we don't [want to] cannibalize our own efforts. That won't change."

While staying true to CAKE's core operating principles is key, the company won't remain static, especially as the industry and its audience evolve. Both Galton and Gardiner hint at wanting to take on content at the extreme edges of what is traditionally considered kids & family entertainment.

"We say kids & family, which [means] putting six-year-olds and 40-year-olds in a room together," explains Gardiner. "But there's also content that teenagers may be watching with their parents or watching on their own. And at some point, 15- and 16-year-olds are broadening out and trying new genres. It's probably too early to talk about, but we are looking at how the fringe business of kids and TV works—especially in animation—and how we can develop that."

Gardiner wants to hear from all types of content producers, no matter what stage their projects are at. Because CAKE is more than a distributor, the company is well-suited to being a partner that can jump in and add value at any point in the process, he says. And he's open to seeing anything from an elevator pitch to a fully produced series, as long as it comes from someone who is passionate about the kids side of the business and isn't just in it to make a quick buck.

But while Gardiner and Galton are optimistic about what they can achieve together, they aren't unaware of the state of the industry and its preference for established brands over original content.

"Everyone wants a surefire win, so everyone's playing it very safe. Every conversation we're having with people is, 'We're not looking to break new content. We want known IP,'" says Galton. "They don't want to break ground on new content because they don't think it works, they don't know how to market to kids, [and] they want someone else to do the work for them. So therefore, you get very vanilla kids offerings on platforms."

However, these objections are usually followed closely by: "We're also looking for the next *Bluey*"—to which he counters, "OK, but if you're not looking to break ground on new content, you're never going to get a *Bluey*. You have to make some bets, and you have to be brave." K

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BIG GIG Caroline Tyre

THE BIG GIG: VP of global content distribution at Spin Master Entertainment

PREVIOUSLY: VP of global sales and rights strategy at WildBrain

UP THE RANKS Toronto's Decode Entertainment (now WildBrain) provided Tyre with a gateway into the biz when she joined as a receptionist in 1997. Her interest in distribution blossomed there, leading to a series of increasingly senior sales roles, first at Decode and then elsewhere.

"I really liked sending content out to the world [and] learning what kids liked," says Tyre, who went on to work at Teletoon as a director of programming (2007 to 2011) and at GBI as head of sales and GM of Kartoon Channel! (2019 to 2020). She migrated back to WildBrain four years ago, overseeing big deals like last year's rollout of the Degrassi franchise on Prime Video during her second tenure.

FAMILIAR TERRAIN Between 2013 and 2016, Tyre helped Spin Master set up its distribution division as a consultant. And now she has returned to head up its international content distribution team.

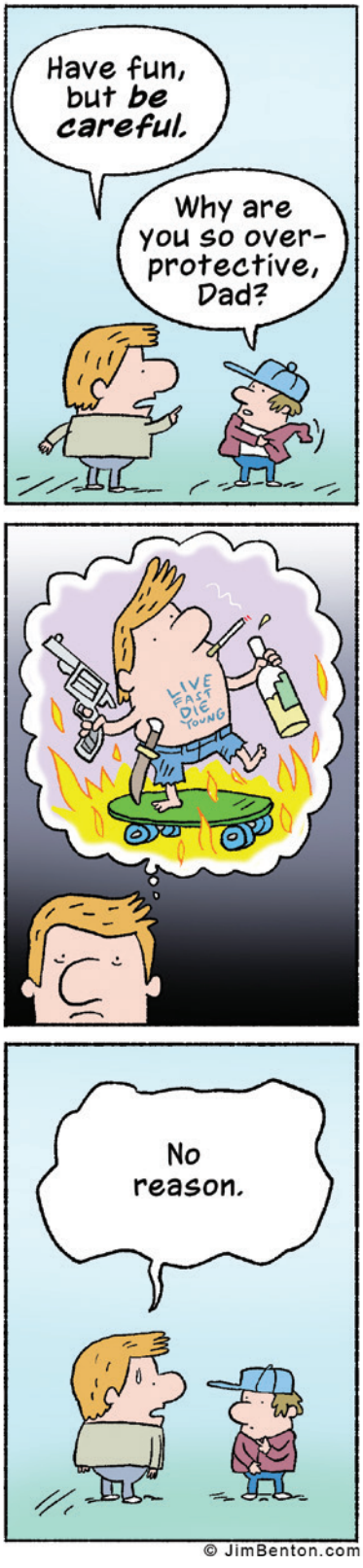
SME offers Tyre a good balance of opportunities, from expanding the reach of established hits like *PAW Patrol*, to building franchises around *Unicorn Academy* and *Vida the Vet*. Working to deliver on the international broadcasting strategy for these fledgling IPs is a top priority at the moment, along with navigating fragmentation. "Children are still consuming content in droves—it's just the landscape of how and where they're watching that's changing so quickly," she says. "YouTube and gaming are absolutely critical for capturing kid viewers."

EXPANSION PLANS In September, SME expanded Tyre's role to also include oversight of music and YouTube business strategy. She's currently busy setting up international free-to-air sales for *Vida the Vet* (52 x 11 minutes) in the wake of SME releasing packages of music videos and *Ask Vida* original shorts (26 x two minutes) on YouTube in partnership with Moonbug Entertainment. And she has already closed several key deals for *Unicorn Academy* in China (Mango TV, Tencent, Youku, iQIYI), Germany (Super RTL), Canada (CBC) and France (Gulli).

TikTok is also on Tyre's radar as she expands the company's catalogue of bite-sized content. And she's equally keen to leverage Roblox—where Spin Master has already had success previewing shows like *Bakugan: Battle Planet* and *Unicorn Academy* before executing broader rollouts. "Us being in that [social] space will be another [important] tool," she notes.—Sadhana Bharanidharan

Know your audience

BY: JIM BENTON



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Kartoon Studios' reimagined Pooh is set to roll out via Prime Video as a series and four holiday specials

Old honey, new jar

There's about to be an influx of high-recognition IPs up for grabs in the market, but the playground of public domain is as complex as it is lucrative.

BY: SADHANA BHARANIDHARAN

The roaring '20s gave birth to The Walt Disney Company, talking pictures and a handful of classic animated and comic strip characters that are poised to hit the market at large as public-domain properties in the next decade. And it's going to get really interesting when they do.

But first, some history. The US Copyright Term Extension Act was signed into law in 1998, initiating a two-decade hold on IPs entering the public domain. This meant that for any character created in 1923 or later, the copyright term prohibiting its unauthorized use stretched from 47 years (as outlined under the earlier Copyright Act of 1976) to 67 years.

That extension expired in 2019, setting off a modern-day gold rush of producers looking to capitalize on the considerable name recognition of these jazz-age creations.

And the prospect of navigating today's risk-averse market by engaging audiences with tried-and-true characters and storylines is understandably appealing.

US-based Sycamore Studios made a splashy launch in August by announcing a family feature film about Doctor Dolittle (in the public domain since the '90s) as its first project. And even more attention-grabbing moves have come from indies that aren't shy about shifting gears from wholesome to gruesome—evidenced by slasher flicks and violent games based on family classics like Steamboat Willie and Winnie-the-Pooh.

In contrast, the kids industry has taken a steadier approach, quietly putting new family-friendly spins on old fare. But when you're a kids producer fighting for the same audience as the Mouse House, rather than an R-rated production house, there are more hoops to jump through to get to the "hunny."

Bear necessities

Winnie-the-Pooh, who debuted in a 1926 book by English author A. A. Milne, has captured the interest of more than one player in the kids space. The earliest iterations of the "bear of very little brain" and his crew entered the public domain in 2022, with one exception. Tigger—who first came on the scene in 1928's *The House at Pooh Corner*—only gained public-domain status this year.

Estimates peg Pooh's lifetime revenue in the ballpark of US$50 billion, ahead of other pop-culture giants such as Hello Kitty, Harry Potter and Barbie. This ROI potential inspired Kartoon Studios CEO Andy

Heyward to place "a very large bet on the table" for a new Pooh megabrand. And WTP SPV1 in the UK (a subsidiary of Catalyst Venture Partners) jumped on board, investing US$30 million in production funding under a deal that allows Kartoon to retain full ownership of the company, with Catalyst only taking equity stakes in the output.

With a team of industry veterans already recruited, Kartoon's strategy relies on celebrity voice talent and a fairly speedy turnaround to launch its version of Pooh ahead of the competition. "The market is only going to absorb so much Winnie-the-Pooh," Heyward notes.

Kartoon's initial Pooh content will include a series (with 200 episodes planned) and holiday specials for Halloween, Thanksgiving, Easter and back-to-school—all rolling out on the Kartoon Channel! via Prime Video, with subscriptions priced at US$3.99 per month. This steady year-round supply of content will be attractive to retailers seeking omnipresent brands, explains Heyward.

The studio has already signed Alliance Entertainment to distribute Pooh-related consumer products. And Heyward is keen to channel the brand's proven licensing power into "every imaginable category," including toys, apparel, publishing, party goods and stationery.

Kartoon is using the NVIDIA-owned platform Omniverse (which boasts generative AI tools) as part of its pipeline. "We felt this was an opportunity to take advantage of new technologies with AI and machine learning that could blend with human creative talent," says Heyward.

Conversely, New York-based Baboon Animation is trading speed for a more "handmade" approach, according to president Mike de Seve. In 2022, the company began prepping a whimsical Pooh prequel pic called *Beyond Pooh Corner* in partnership with LA-based content incubator IQI Media. This live-action/animated iteration will avoid AI and bank on authenticity, says de Seve.

His team even secured approval to film at the real-life inspiration for the Hundred Acre Wood, Ashdown Forest in East Sussex, England. Attracting 1.5 million visitors annually, this recognizable setting should help generate fandom buzz for *Beyond Pooh Corner*, which is now fielding global sales offers for a theatrical release.

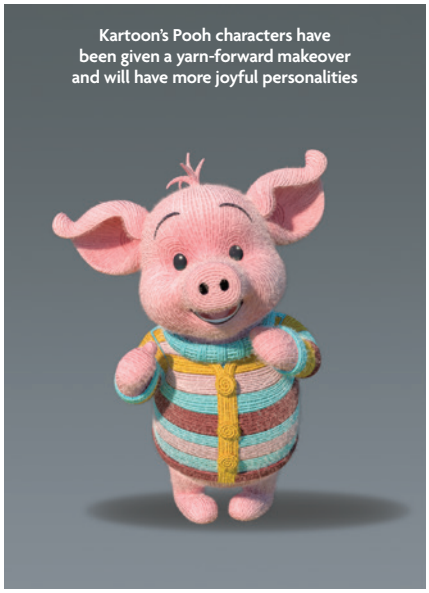
Distinguished new spin

"The Disney Pooh was a little melancholy, while ours is going to be very joyous," Heyward teases about Kartoon's more playful version of the Pooh Corner characters, including a yarn-based makeover that gives the toy animals a knitted appearance. Song and dance will also be central to this brand, with LiveOne Entertainment producing, publishing and distributing all of the original music.

But Heyward admits to following Disney's playbook when it comes to emphasizing diversity—much like the varied "emotions" in Pixar's *Inside Out 2*.

"One thing that's so clear [from that film's success] is that diversity of personality resonates with young audiences—so that's a big part of how we're telling our Pooh stories," he says. With this in mind, Kartoon will introduce two new female characters. "We felt it was important to bring a little more gender diversity into the lineup."

For its part, Baboon's *Beyond Pooh Corner* will introduce a bear who's much more like a real child than the Disney version, says de Seve. "They made [Pooh] unique in choosing his red shirt in that particular [style].



Kartoon's Pooh characters have been given a yarn-forward makeover and will have more joyful personalities

GOING PUBLIC

Over the next dozen years, original iterations of these characters will enter the public domain, setting the stage for new chapters.

2025 Popeye the Sailor	**2034** Superman
2026 Betty Boop	**2035** Batman
2026 Pluto	**2036** Tom & Jerry
2028 Goofy	**2036** Bugs Bunny
2030 Donald Duck	**2037** Wonder Woman

Source: *The Public Domain Newsletter*, April 2024 by Jennifer Jenkins, with research from Sean Dudley (Center for the Study of the Public Domain, Duke Law School).

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Kids

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Baboon Animation is rendering the Pooh Corner characters in a handmade style and making them thinner, to look more like original toys from the 1920s

SWINGING INTO PRODUCTION

Digging deeper into the public-domain treasure chest, Baboon Animation is also developing a futuristic, sci-fi version of Tarzan in a film called *Tarzon of the Eeps*. Instead of growing up in a jungle raised by apes, this family feature explores what happens when a baby gets stranded on a junk planet where humanity's discarded gadgets and gizmos have all become sentient. "The old technology has a lot of compassion and helps the baby survive," Mike de Seve teases.

Also, they made him a little fatter. Our idea is to make him a little skinnier—more like the original teddy bears [from that era]."

Invoking another iconic book-based bear, de Seve is inspired to follow StudioCanal's Paddington blueprint that saw the 2014 feature film set the tone before gradually expanding into a TV series, a musical and more.

Beyond Pooh Corner and subsequent franchise extensions (including a *Stories from Pooh Corner* podcast produced with GoKidGo) will aim for broader all-ages appeal rather than targeting a specific kids demo. To achieve this, the team will refresh the lovably lethargic personality tied to Disney's Pooh by introducing a wittier and comparatively fast-paced style for the character and the franchise as a whole.

Common challenges

Assessing the look of the characters' public-domain version compared to the copyright-protected versions is key to avoiding infringement, says Bob Tarantino, a copyright lawyer who is part of the media and entertainment group at law firm Dentons Canada.

Amber fur, for example, could be a potential gray area when it comes to Pooh because he was colorless in the books that have entered the public domain. (Notably, Pooh's real-life inspiration was a female black bear.) So questions may arise over what colors or alternative shades of yellow/orange are safe to use without stepping into Disney's territory.

And although a new Pooh adaptation could use a line of dialogue from the book without much concern, Tarantino recommends caution when it's a full-fledged storyline. It's critical to ensure that a project is "hewing to the public-domain version and not a later variation or gloss on the public-domain version, which itself might still be protected by copyright," he says.

Another important factor to keep in mind is that the duration of copyright for an IP can vary from country to country (though it is similar in major markets such as the US and the EU).

One example is the original James Bond novels by author Ian Fleming (who also wrote the children's story *Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang: The Magical Car*). "Fleming died in 1964, so his novels are public domain in Canada, [where] the copyright expired in 2014," says Tarantino. "But they remain protected in many other countries."

Ultimately, it's crucial to consult a lawyer before getting involved with a public-domain IP, he adds. "It can be challenging, both creatively and from a legal perspective, to come up with solutions that present as little risk as possible, while also giving effect to the creative output envisioned for the project." k

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UPPER PRESCHOOL

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Mattel chose *UNO Car Party!* as its first AirConsole in-vehicle game because *UNO*'s social nature and easy-to-learn rules make it ideal for long or short journeys

Road trippin'

Parents behind the wheel can expect to hear "Are we there yet?" a lot less as techcos, content providers and automakers meet the growing demand for more diversified in-vehicle entertainment.

BY: JEREMY DICKSON

As automobile technology advances and screens become more ubiquitous in our everyday lives, cars are becoming more like living rooms on wheels—pre-loaded with stuff to watch and games to play. In fact, the passenger vehicle is currently one of the fastest-growing distribution channels for entertainment content.

According to research firm Nova One Advisor, the global automotive infotainment market hit US$15 billion in 2023, and it's projected to reach around US$38.9 billion by 2033, growing at an annual rate of 10%.

One of the biggest companies looking to monetize this growth is South Korean electronics giant LG Electronics. Though it's best known for smart TVs and home appliances, LG recently expanded into the in-vehicle entertainment space.

"Our vehicle solutions division is our fastest-growing business, and a key growth engine for the company going forward," says John I. Taylor, SVP of LG Electronics North America.

LG's first in-vehicle entertainment system—the webOS-based automotive content platform (ACP)—is the centerpiece of LG's PlayWare software solution, bringing the brand's smart TV experience of high-definition content and spatial sound into any vehicle.

Hyundai Motor Group's new Genesis models were the first to get the ACP system in November 2023. As part of the deal, LG leveraged its existing smart TV relationship with YouTube to bring the app and its raft of kids & family content onto the platform.

"Some of the LG secret sauce is that we are technology leaders in screens, but we also have deep ties in the content community because of our decade of leadership in smart TVs," says Taylor. "For the in-vehicle space, we want to offer the widest range of content that's available through smart TVs, with an emphasis on kid- and family-friendly content."

Since its YouTube deal, LG has added a wide range of popular apps to its ACP, including Netflix, Disney+, TikTok, Baby Shark World for Kids, Stingray Karaoke, games platform Play.Works, free streaming service LG Channels, and casual games *El Dorado* and *Gold Tower Defence*.

Locking down mobile education app Baby Shark World for Kids—which features 9,000-plus songs and stories for young learners—was a particularly big get, says Taylor. The first vehicle to include the integrated ACP/Baby Shark World for Kids offering in May 2024 was the Kia EV3 electric SUV. "We're seeing lots of growth potential for in-vehicle educational kids content, so we're looking for more of that to diversify our content offerings," says Taylor.

The addition of Disney+ to the ACP in July 2024 was another key deal for LG. "It's obviously one of the must-have smart TV apps that delivers incredible content," he adds. The ACP with Disney+ was first available for vehicles in South Korea and is now set to roll out globally.

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The ACP is continuously updated and enhanced to ensure seamless integration with services and applications. The system's preloaded content varies depending on LG's deals with content partners and automakers, says Taylor.

Looking ahead, touchscreen games are also on his wishlist. "Offering more kids games is part of the plan; we definitely see the growth there."

As LG continues to increase its in-vehicle gaming and content offerings for kids, Taylor stresses the importance of safe content viewing and compliance with distracted driving regulations.

"Our Parental Lock feature is an important element of the ACP that allows parents to curate what their kids are watching, and is controlled from the front seat," he says. "And in accordance with driving regulations, the ACP's content cannot be played on the front seat display while the vehicle is in motion, but the rear-seat display can operate both while driving and when stationary."

Nickelodeon, YouTube Kids and Toon Goggles are among the kids content partners that have already signed on with Access's Twine4Car system

Wheeling and dealing

Another key player racking up partnerships in the automotive and content industries is Tokyo-based software developer Access. In 2018, the company introduced Twine4Car, a content aggregation platform featuring a wide range of apps, TV services, VOD offerings and car-centric information. Designed to be flexible, the platform works on any operating system, including Android, iOS, Linux and QNX-based systems.

Its features include a dedicated in-car app store; synchronized playback for multiple devices; curated recommendations; and parental remote control for determining the type of content kid passengers can consume.

ACCESS has so far secured Twine4Car deals globally with BMW, and with Chinese car manufacturers XPeng and Great Wall Motor Company for their global export markets, beginning with LatAm and Europe. Agreements are also in the works to include the infotainment system in cars from a number of European and Asian automakers.

The platform has attracted numerous kids content partners, including Nickelodeon, YouTube Kids, Indian OTT platform Voot Kids, gaming app Kidomi and Toon Goggles.

While these services encompass a wide range of kids & family content, educational content and touch-based games are a particular focus for Akbar Syed, VP of automotive product and content at Access Europe. In India, for example, learning apps—especially those featuring student tutors—are a high priority for Access's vehicle partners. "This is because students in the cities often have long commutes from school to home due to traffic situations, and are using apps to do their homework on the way," explains Syed.

And since India boasts high content consumption and long travel times, Access is also testing a new in-car monetization model by working with OTT providers to bundle curated content into single in-car subscription offers, giving riders more options if they don't have subscriptions to specific Twine4Car apps that require them.

The engagement factor

Speaking of new experiments, Mattel also recently joined the in-car entertainment party in an effort to make this kind of on-the-go gaming more of a fun and social experience.

In a partnership with BMW Group and gaming platform AirConsole, the toyco transformed its classic card game *UNO* into a multi-screen experience for cars. After debuting at Gamescom in Germany, *UNO Car Party!* rolled out on the AirConsole platform in more than half a million BMW and MINI vehicles on August 21.

Up to four players can connect to the game using their personal devices, but gameplay can only be enabled when the car is in park.

Though UNO is already a big global brand, Mattel primarily chose it for the project because the game's social nature and easy-to-learn rules make it ideal for both short- and long-haul road trips, says Erika Winterholler, head of business development for digital gaming at Mattel.

"We could have taken a baby-steps approach because in-car entertainment is a new space, but once we saw what AirConsole could deliver in terms of technology, the game was easy to envision, and that made it easy for us to take the next steps," says Winterholler.

As it looks to grow in the space, Mattel is trying to be qualitative, not quantitative. "Making sure the experience is authentic and right for the car is likely going to be the driving force for what we look at next," notes Winterholler.

AirConsole also recently partnered with Volkswagen, which integrated the gaming platform into its new Passat, Tiguan and Golf product lines in select European countries last month.

Overcoming obstacles

LG's main challenge is balancing the needs of automakers and content partners, says Taylor. "We're focused on trying to make it easier for the car manufacturers to integrate the ACP into their systems. At the same time, we want to ensure that our content partners can launch their services with minimal and seamless effort in the automotive space," he explains.

"So, in some ways, we're the matchmaker that brings all the stakeholders together, which also represents the biggest opportunity for innovation and growth. As automakers continue to embrace software-defined vehicles in the years ahead, delivering content in compelling ways is going to be increasingly important."

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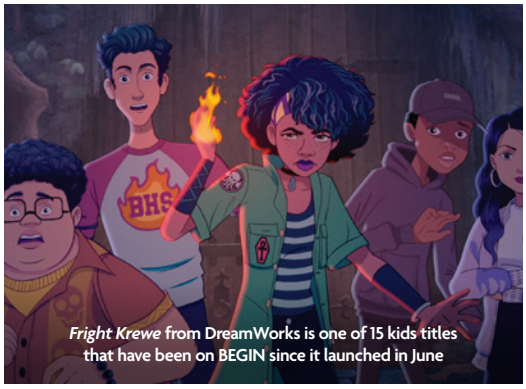
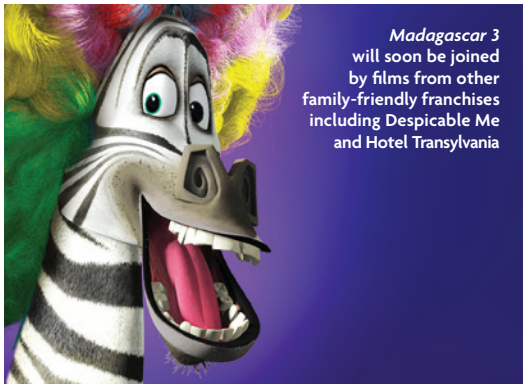
Jonathan Mark, co-founder and CEO of BEGIN

Vintage series *Jackie Chan Adventures* is set to drop soon on the platform



Fright Krewe from DreamWorks is one of 15 kids titles that have been on BEGIN since it launched in June



Madagascar 3 will soon be joined by films from other family-friendly franchises including Despicable Me and Hotel Transylvania

THE HOOKUP

Kidscreen checks in with new, established and evolving kids content buyers to find out what they're looking for right now.

BY: SADHANA BHARANIDHARAN

It's just the beginning for BEGIN, a new ad-free streaming service that launched in Pakistan at the end of May. Founded by Jonathan Mark (CEO) and Zaayer Merchant (executive director), the young company behind this venture got the ball rolling in Q1 when it secured seed funding from regional venture-cap investor Z2C Limited.

The team has initially been focused on marketing live sports to drive up subscriptions, but defining a strategy to capture kids is a key priority. Pakistan is the fifth most-populated country in the world, with under-14s making up roughly 40% of its 241 million inhabitants, according to 2023 census data.

Looking ahead, the plan is to expand BEGIN's reach throughout Southwest Asia, with launches in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka set to play out later this year. And a long-term growth opportunity that Mark identified early on is to eventually target the "huge" expat communities living in Gulf Cooperation Council countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE).

Priced at US$3.60 monthly and US$36 annually for the All Entertainment Package, BEGIN has more than 55,000 total downloads on Google Play and the Apple App Store, with kids titles accounting for roughly 35% of overall viewership, says Mark.

What is BEGIN looking for?

Focusing on acquisitions, Mark says the service is "actively seeking partnerships with major Western content distributors to enrich our initial offerings." While "snackable" titles are the preference for preschoolers, he is also looking for shows with 20- to 30-minute episodes to appeal to bridge/tween viewers. The company is prioritizing animation over live action because of its higher cross-cultural appeal.

BEGIN's kids catalogue is franchise-heavy at the moment, primarily due to package deals with Sony Pictures Entertainment and NBCUniversal. But Mark is also open to buying lesser-known indie content, especially comedy-driven adventures showcasing characters with "emotional intelligence" and a "strong moral compass." The team is keen to secure exclusive regional rights, so content that's already available on free platforms like YouTube is off the table. "Our goal is to provide exclusive and premium content that justifies the value of our platform to subscribers."

After completing another fundraising round, BEGIN plans to start investing in original kids programming down the line, in local languages including Urdu, Bengali and Sinhalese. This strategy should address what Mark sees as a significant gap when it comes to "culturally relevant" content and STEM-based programming.

Recently launched

BEGIN's initial kids titles include feature films *The Smurfs* (2011) and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014) from Sony, and DreamWorks Animation's *Madagascar 3* (2012) and tween horror series *Fright Krewe* (10 x 22 minutes). Mark plans to add films from franchises like Despicable Me and Hotel Transylvania soon, but no exact dates have been set. And soon-to-drop TV shows run the gamut from action-packed vintage series *Jackie Chan Adventures* (95 x 22 minutes) to 2024's superhero comedy *Megamind Rules!* (eight x 22 minutes). Looking to build out its library even more, BEGIN is in talks with companies such as Paramount Global/Nickelodeon. k

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Order up!

Brand owners are cooking up new kids meal programs with fast-food chains to turn hungry customers into loyal fans.

BY: COLE WATSON

Think back to when you were a kid and your parents would take you out to eat at your favorite fast-food restaurant. Just stepping through the front doors was like entering a different world filled with colorful mascot characters and delicious food—plus you got to take home a new toy based on whatever family feature film was playing in theaters at the time. For many adults, these experiences created a powerful sense of nostalgia that has made them lifelong patrons of their favorite QSR (quick-service restaurant) chains.

Fast-forward to today, QSR deals are still an invaluable tool for building brand awareness with kids. And with so many properties fighting for market share, companies are relying more than ever on their global reach and the strength of a well-developed kids meal program to make meaningful impressions during influential family moments like meal times.

The global QSR industry generated more than US$894 billion in revenue last year, according to a report published in August by research firm Fortune Business Insights. But what makes this figure even more impressive is that the industry itself has been growing at a steady rate of 8.96% since 2019, thanks largely to the rapid growth of digital food ordering services like Uber Eats, DoorDash and SkipTheDishes. And Fortune is forecasting that this growth will continue until at least 2032 as consumers continue to increase the amount they spend on dining out.

The iconic McDonald's Happy Meal is the gold standard for brand crossovers, and one of the latest featuring *MultiVersus* includes not only characters and games, but also a free digital adventure

The golden arches

McDonald's is revered as one of the top-performing QSRs worldwide, and it's not hard to see why. The American fast-food chain operates more than 40,000 restaurants worldwide and claims to serve as many as 69 million customers each day.

Last year alone, McDonald's generated US$25.49 billion in revenue, up 9.97% from US$23.18 billion in 2022. And one tool that was instrumental to achieving this growth was the company's 50-year-long logistics partner HAVI and its subsidiary tms (formerly known as The Marketing Store), which manages all of McDonald's marketing campaigns and promotions.

Michael Edelstein, VP of brand partnerships at tms, has spent the past 12 years positioned as the first point of contact for major studios looking to translate their entertainment franchises into new Happy Meal programs.

The iconic kids meal has been a staple for McDonald's since 1979, and tms is always looking for new brands to feature in the program and help modernize its premium offerings (including toys, books and games) in order to drive kids and families to the QSR's many locations, says Edelstein. "Across the landscape, the core goal of Happy Meal is to reach kids & familiy audiences and, much like McDonald's itself, to be at the center of what's popular in today's culture."

With this in mind, tms has helped McDonald's serve up several recent licensed Happy Meal deals targeting a global multi-generational audience, with partners including Warner Bros. Discovery (MultiVersus), Universal Pictures (Despicable Me 4) and even Crocs footwear.

When Edelstein evaluates potential licenses on behalf of McDonald's, some of the elements he looks for are exclusivity, global potential and engaging new ideas for Happy Meal offerings. "We want to be the favorite place for kids to go. Whatever partner we're working with at that time, the offering needs to be relevant to kids and incorporate both a physical and digital element, because we want to deliver a memorable experience for them."

Happy deal, happy meal

In one of this year's more memorable QSR deals, Konami Cross Media NY and Sanrio collaborated on the first-ever co-branded Happy Meal between iconic trading card game *Yu-Gi-Oh!* and the Hello Kitty lifestyle brand. This campaign kicked off in March with a set of 10 collectible plush toys and a mobile game featuring Hello Kitty characters dressing up as *Yu-Gi-Oh!* monsters including Dark Magician, Blue-Eyes White Dragon and Exodia.

Since launching eight months ago, this crossover Happy Meal has spread worldwide, making initial stops in Europe, Australia and Canada and then landing in the US this fall. But it took nearly a decade to come together, according to Jennifer Coleman, Konami's VP of marketing and licensing.

"Yu-Gi-Oh! was in a different place in the market when I first came on board in 2012," says Coleman. "The TCG has always been so strong for us, and we have an incredibly loyal fan base, but the property had migrated away from being viewed as a kids brand, and we wanted to appeal to Gen Alpha with something new." From the outset, her goal was to use the McDonald's platform and reach to expand Yu-Gi-Oh!'s audience.

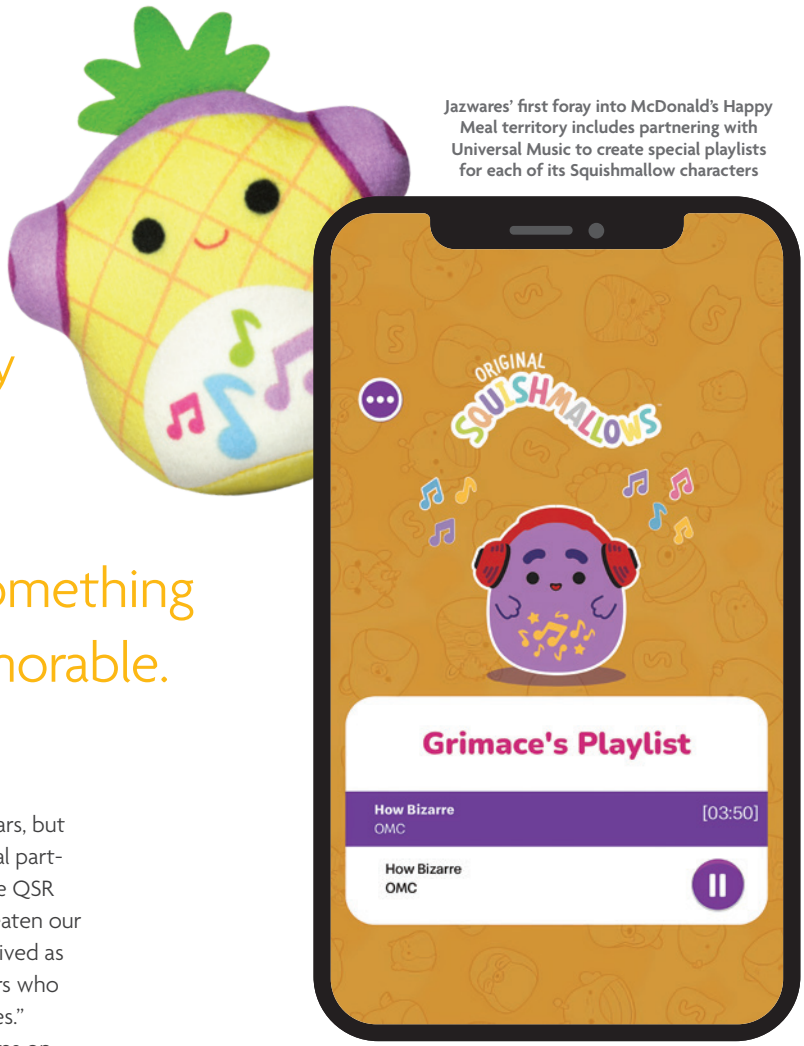
Earlier this year, Konami and Sanrio teamed up to create the first-ever Happy Meals combining Hello Kitty and TCG brand Yu-Gi-Oh!

Miraculous Corp is taking its flagship IP to local fast-food chains like Herfy in the Middle East

Coleman adds that the crossover with Sanrio was not originally part of the pitch, and what made McDonald's ultimately decide to pursue a Yu-Gi-Oh! Happy Meal was that the QSR wanted to make new licensed toys and games based on an already established anime franchise.

"Anime was booming throughout the pandemic, and it created an opportunity for us to be culturally relevant to the McDonald's audience," she says. "After we locked down the deal in 2022, we began the two-year process of figuring out what we wanted to build together with tms."

Florida-based toyco Jazwares capitalized on a huge cultural and retail boom for plush toys to score a Happy Meal deal for its flagship Squishmallows IP. Brand and marketing EVP Gerhard Runken says Jazwares also signed its deal in 2022, for a campaign in 70-plus markets around the world.



Jazwares' first foray into McDonald's Happy Meal territory includes partnering with Universal Music to create special playlists for each of its Squishmallow characters

When you have two global brands...the primary mission becomes being respectful of each other's DNA so you can create something ground-breaking and memorable.

—Gerhard Runken, Jazwares

Jazwares had been exploring a new QSR deal for several years, but wanted to take its time and evaluate a wide range of potential partners, explains Runken. "A lot of it comes down to whether the QSR aligns with our DNA and [doesn't] disenchant our fans or threaten our authenticity as a brand," he says. "We never want to be perceived as label-slapping or doing something formulaic; we want partners who share our creative vision and provide meaningful opportunities."

Landing at the Golden Arches, Jazwares got to work with tms on creating 12 new Squishmallows for the campaign, developing unique packaging, and signing off on all of the marketing assets, which spanned retail posters, inserts and activity sheets. To help power up the Happy Meal, Jazwares also joined forces with Universal Music Group to source and create curated music playlists for each of the collectible characters as an extra digital element.

One thing that helped accelerate the Happy Meal's development was sitting down with tms and McDonald's during the beginning phases of the collaboration to identify any restrictions or guardrails the companies might clash on, adds Runken.

"It's important to remember that when you have two global brands—each with their own set of guidelines—the primary mission becomes being respectful of each other's DNA so you can create something ground-breaking and memorable," says Runken.

Local delicacies

ZAG's flagship franchise Miraculous: Tales of Ladybug & Cat Noir has enjoyed several kids meal campaigns with McDonald's and Burger King since the brand debuted in 2015. And all hands at Miraculous Corp (the company's new joint-venture with Mediawan) are on deck to boost the IP's presence worldwide in the QSR and food & beverage categories.

One component of this strategy is to target smaller QSR chains that have built up a strong reputation with consumers in their local territories. Miraculous Corp put this plan into practice in May by signing its first kids meal deal with Herfy, one of the largest QSR chains operating in the Middle East, with more than 380 restaurants.

Herfy is an ideal partner for the Miraculous brand for several reasons, says COO Julian Jacob. It has a solid reputation for providing budget-friendly meals and serving high-quality menu items, and it also has great market penetration in Saudia Arabia, Turkey, Kuwait and Bangladesh.

This Miraculous campaign ran throughout July and featured many of the elements pioneered by McDonald's, including unique packaging, branded tray liners and a set of five collectible toys. Herfy also added a digital component to the campaign, leveraging AR technology to let kids use a smartphone to transform the restaurant around them into Paris and see their favorite characters from the series in that setting.

"Creating an engaging and on-trend experience for kids is essential," says Jacob. "This ensures they have a fantastic time and are excited to share their experiences with their friends, generating buzz and more foot traffic to the restaurant."

He adds that Miraculous Corp will follow up on this campaign later in Q4 when it announces a new QSR campaign with an as-yet-unnamed partner in Italy. "Children around the globe have responded extremely well to our QSRs—they love the fun and engaging experiences we create that not only bring joy, but also foster a sense of connection and loyalty to the Miraculous brand." k

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Pop Mart has opened 12 retail stores in the US since 2022 and plans to add 10 more stateside locations by year's end

Cracking open the box

Blind-box retailers MINISO and Pop Mart have earmarked North America as their next expansion market, with hundreds of new store openings planned there over the next five years.

BY: COLE WATSON

Blind boxes, surprise eggs and trading card booster packs all share a common play pattern of creating suspense and excitement when consumers break open the packaging to reveal a hidden collectible inside. Sometimes they're left with just another duplicate to trade away, but there's always the chance of snagging the rarest one in the set.

Last year, this thrill of the chase helped the global blind-box category generate US$13.5 billion in revenue, a figure that's projected to grow 5.5% year over year until it reaches US$31 billion by 2031, according to market research firm Dataintelo. Key players in this space include China-based retailers MINISO and Pop Mart, who are both laying the foundation for more growth with North American expansion strategies.

MINISO opened its first US location (Pasadena, California) in 2017, and has since expanded its stateside operations to encompass 191 storefronts as of March. By comparison, the retailer owns and operates more than 6,600 stores globally, 4,024 of which are located in mainland China.

Despite its smaller-scale presence in the US, MINISO views this market as a major growth opportunity and is opening upwards of 20 new stores there each quarter, says CMO Robin Liu. In its Q1 2024 financial results, MINISO reported an 108% increase in gross volume sales for its North American division compared to last year, proving to Liu that the company's strategy of opening high-profile flagship stores in New York, New Jersey and LA is resonating with consumers.

"Our retail concept has been evolving since we launched our first store in China in 2013, and we have continuously adapted to meet the needs of our core consumers, especially Gen Z," says Liu. "By aligning our offerings with the passions and interests of our consumers, we've built a shopping environment that feels personal, engaging and uniquely inviting to the young, vibrant audience we serve."

A key driver for MINISO's business is its licensed product inventory, adds Liu. Since signing its very first licensing deal with Sanrio for Hello Kitty in 2016, the retailer has manufactured toys with nearly 100 licensors, including Mattel, Disney, WildBrain and Hasbro. And while blind-box figures are still the main course on its menu, MINISO has also branched out into making licensed lifestyle items ranging from blankets and water bottles, to plush and candy.

"[MINISO's] global design centers in China, the US, Japan and South Korea—supported by more than 1,400 high-quality suppliers—empower us to quickly respond to market trends and customer feedback," says Liu. "As a result, we launch approximately 100 new products every seven days from a vast library of 10,000 product ideas, ensuring that our line remains dynamic and exciting."

Pop Mart, on the other hand, is just beginning its American journey. Since entering the market in 2022, the company has launched

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Pop Mart's Wizarding World collection includes Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them boxes

Cloudco's partnerships with Pop Mart and MINISO are bringing Care Bears to a wide range of new audiences

With 6,600 locations worldwide, MINISO has 191 stores in the US and is looking to open another 80 in the next year

12 DTC storefronts in locations including Las Vegas, California, New Jersey and Washington. And there are 10 more openings planned between now and year-end.

With Texas in its sights as the next target state for expansion, Pop Mart opened a Frisco flagship store in August that's part of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. "The new store allows us to bring our unique retail experience to Texas and create a space where fans can discover new and exciting collectibles, connect with like-minded individuals, and unleash their inner creativity," says Larry Lu, Pop Mart's head of North America.

"With [two more] Houston locations in the pipeline, we are eager to continue growing our Texas presence and engage with our loyal fans and collectors across the country."

But physical storefronts are just one piece of this retail puzzle. As of September, Pop Mart was operating 450 stores globally; however, this pales in comparison to the 2,300 Robo Shop vending machines that make up the core of its business.

Both storefronts and vending machines carry the latest blind boxes designed and manufactured internally by Pop Mart—containing licensed collections for brands like Harry Potter, Batman, Beetlejuice and SpongeBob SquarePants, as well as the company's own portfolio of original characters.

Old IP meets new customers

One licensor doing business with both Pop Mart and MINISO is LA-based Cloudco Entertainment, whose game plan is to leverage these creative and vibrant stores to reintroduce classic brands like Care Bears to a youthful audience, notes head of global licensing Robert Prinzo.

"The strategic partnerships with MINISO and Pop Mart were driven by their unique positions in the market as trendsetters in retail innovation, and by their extensive global footprints," says Prinzo. "These collaborations not only broaden the exposure of Care Bears globally, they also align perfectly with our goal of embedding the brand into the lifestyle segment."

This year alone, Cloudco has added more than 250 Care Bears SKUs to the MINISO line, as well as setting up dedicated in-store display areas to immerse consumers in the shopping experience.

At the same time, Prinzo is chasing after the growing kidult consumer base at Pop Mart with limited- edition blind-box series and crossover figure collections that also feature the retailer's original Space Molly character (which generated US$141.1 million in global revenue last year).

Toy manufacturers that have a dedicated retail footprint provide a wide range of quick-to-market strategies for new products and offer a streamlined communication pipeline, notes Prinzo.

"By partnering directly [with MINISO and Pop Mart], we're right at the source of the latest trends and strategic moves," he says."This gives us a direct line into what consumers are currently excited about, which helps us tailor our offerings to match the market's pulse. Plus, getting a clear view of the retailers' specific strategies for positioning our products means we can develop items that not only fit perfectly within their stores, but also stand out to consumers."

As Cloudco continues its partnerships with blind-box retailers, Prinzo wants to ramp up production and create more product lines to extend the reach of the Care Bears brand. The company is also making moves to develop retail exclusives for the Bears next year with retailers including H&M, Plaza Japan, C&A and Riachuelo.

"We're thrilled about the potential for deeper integration with these retail powerhouses," says Prinzo. "We see a world of possibilities for new product innovations and dynamic cross-promotional opportunities that will take the Care Bears brand to even greater heights around the globe." k

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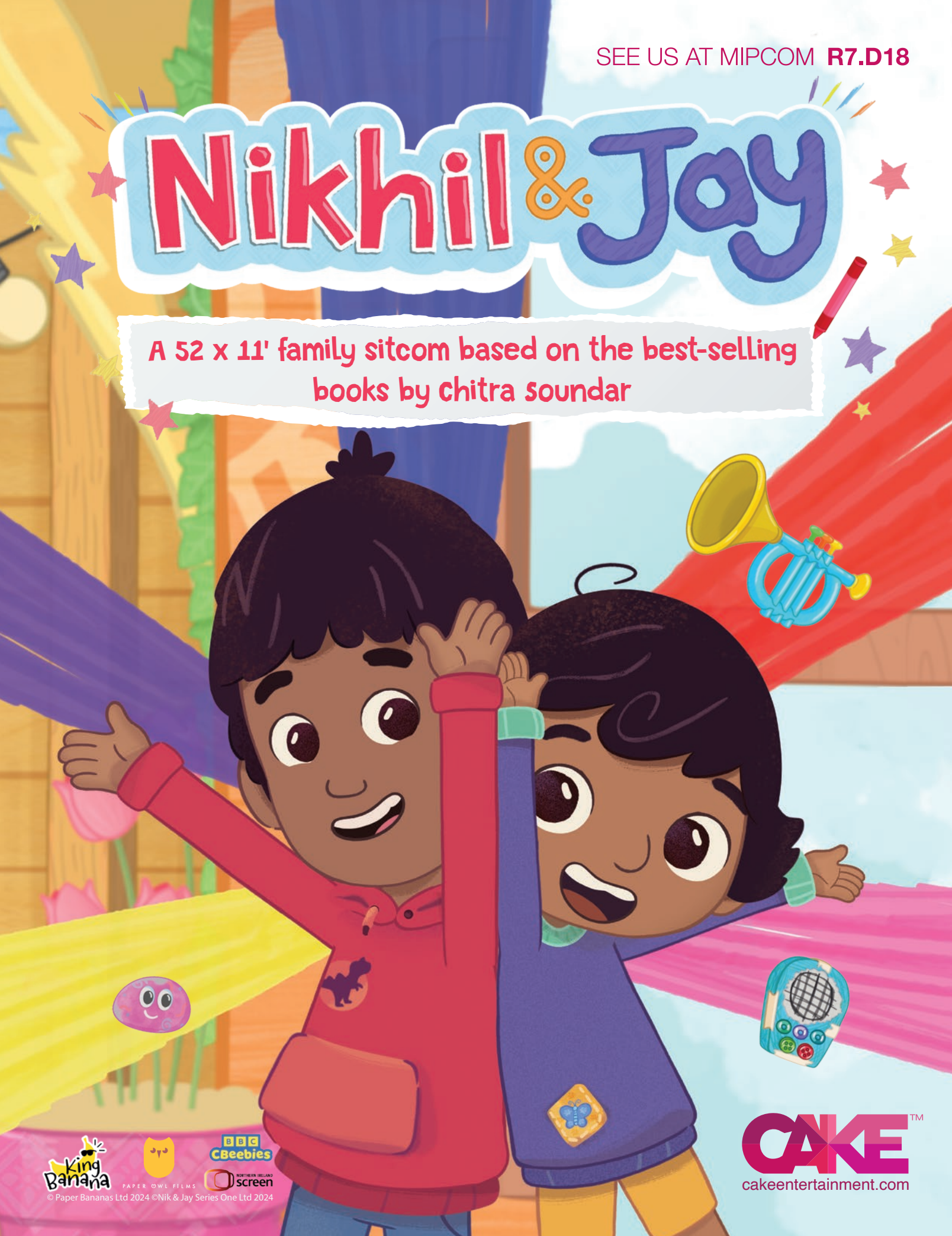

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Generation skinfluence

As the youth skincare industry has a breakout moment (the good kind), kid-friendly brands are hoping to trigger a trendy and responsible new licensing opportunity.

BY: SADHANA BHARANIDHARAN

Skincare has always been a passion for Tara Tersigni, a Bobbi Brown Cosmetics alum and former Yahoo Beauty managing editor. But she was surprised to see bronzing drops produced by skincare companies Glow Recipe and Drunk Elephant on her seven-year-old daughter's Christmas wishlist last year. "She's not even allowed to be on social media," Tersigni says. "But sometimes, all it takes is one big sister or peer on the block [to stir an interest.]"

Indeed, a widespread fascination with skincare among younger kids (popularly dubbed the "Sephora Kids" phenomenon) has caught mainstream attention this year, prompting perplexed adult shoppers and media headlines to ponder why so many tweens are raiding the skincare aisles of the beauty retailer. But the numbers are beginning to paint a picture of this age group's impact.

US households with tweens made 6.3% more shopping trips per year to purchase skincare items than total households did, according to March 2024 data from the consumer intelligence reporting company NIQ. That same month, a report from YPulse (a Gen Z and Millennial market research company) estimated that nearly half (48%) of tween girls in the US and Canada use skincare products, outpacing their use of cosmetics (42%). And roughly 46% of parents reported buying skincare products for their Gen Alpha kids in an April 2024 survey published by Statista.

Though the youth demo's general curiosity about beauty products is rather perennial, Gen Alpha stands out from past generations thanks to its combined spending power and its interest in high-end skincare brands (instead of the more obviously made-for-kids products).

"This trend really started to take shape within the past year, peaked during holiday season 2023, [and] continues to move forward with force," says Dr. Brooke Jeffy, a Scottsdale, Arizona-based dermatologist and founder of skincare brand BTWN. "Tweens just want to fit in, and skincare and certain

Specifically targeted at kids, YAWN's products provide moisture without harsh ingredients or claims of results such as acne prevention or anti-aging

YAWN's products are designed to be fun and allow kids to express themselves without harming their young, healthy skin

products have become a status symbol," she adds, noting that growing up with social media has been instrumental for this shift—be it the celebrity-powered *Beauty Secrets* series from Vogue (14.8 million subscribers) or the everyday "get ready with me" (GRWM) videos that often take viewers through a poster's regimen of cleaners, serums and toners.

Room for disruption

Traditionally adult-skewing brands and stores have taken varying steps to navigate this sudden influx of Gen Alpha customers. Amid scrutiny, Drunk Elephant turned to Instagram in December 2023 to outline which of its products are and aren't safe for kids and tweens. Personal care giants like Kiehl's and Dove both rolled out online campaigns decrying Gen Alpha's concerning glorification of anti-aging products, with striking images. (Kiehl's, for instance, paired a visual of children playing in the mud with the tagline, "The only face mask kids should put on.")

Jeffy, who is certified by the American Board of Dermatology, is just one of many dermatologists who have been sounding the alarm about the risks tweens are taking by adopting multi-step skincare routines that are unnecessary at best and damaging at worst, noting that these kinds of routines can trigger acne, redness, irritation and chemical burns—to say nothing of the less tangible and more harmful implications they can have on mental health and body image.

One sobering stat from Dove's campaign shared that roughly half of all young girls expect to worry more about their appearance as they age (as per a global survey of 9,475 girls ages 10 to 17 conducted by Edelman DXI).

But somewhere in between the vast extremes of the occasionally sketchy just-for-kids products and the ultra-expensive age-inappropriate brands, an opportunity has been brewing for skincare players to responsibly cater to tweens/teens, keeping the focus on self-care, while also providing the aspiration these young consumers crave.

That was one of the goals for Tersigni when she rolled out her brand YAWN, marketed as a non-toxic skincare/make-up line for kids ages three and up. YAWN doesn't make promises of perfecting skin or eradicating blemishes, but instead focuses more on being an avenue of expression and play for kids, Tersigni explains. "It's not about transforming yourself; it's about having fun and feeling great with safe formulas."

Launched in January, the fledgling skincare line includes a face-stick, a lip balm and a body balm, all priced between US$18 and US$24. These products are primarily about moisturizing and soothing the skin, while the face-stick is tinted with a very subtle hint of color for self-expression. Tersigni hired ABD creative director Simon Mortimer to design eye-catching pastel containers for the products in an effort to meet Gen Alpha's love for collectible and "aesthetic" packaging.

The licensing opportunity

New York-based skincare brand and company Bubble—which has a strong following of Gen Z and Gen Alpha consumers—locked down its first-ever licensing deal this summer, teaming up with Pixar to launch an *Inside Out 2* skincare kit in which each product is creatively branded with one of the movie protagonist's emotions.

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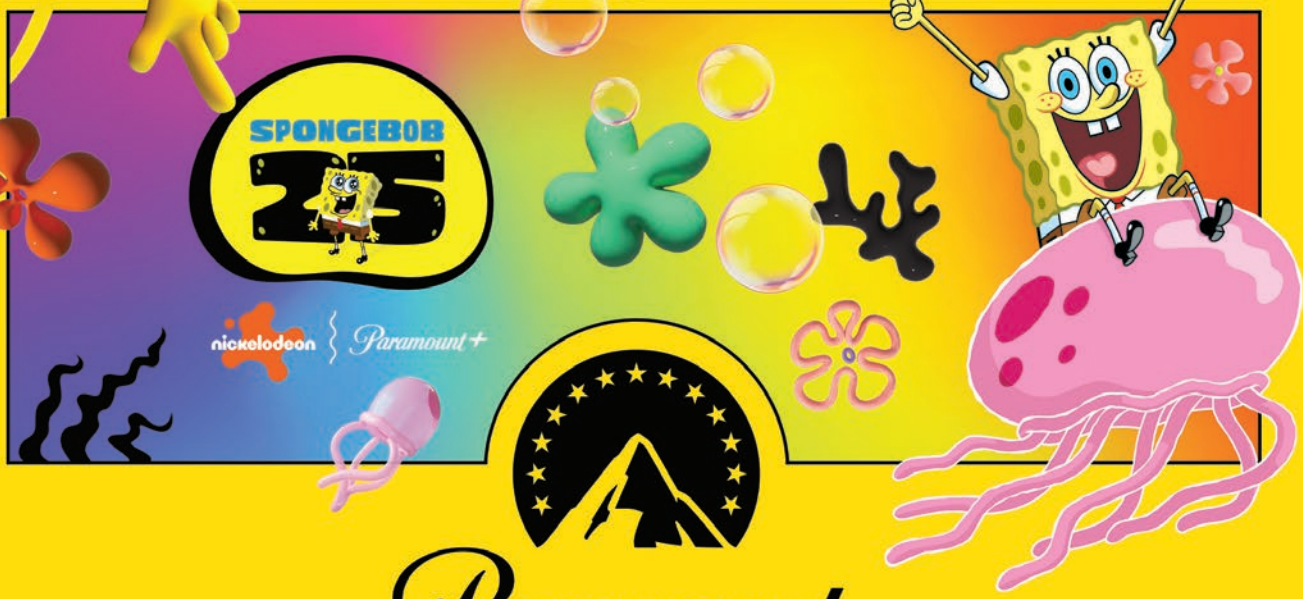

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Between 2022 and 2023, online searches for Bubble's products spiked by a whopping 2,872% to 3.9 million (according to the Cosmetify Index 2023), with a youth-focused social media presence boasting 20 million TikTok likes. (While some are only for the 13-plus crowd, the company says most of its products are safe for everyone.)

This Disney deal combined a trendy internet-loved skincare line with the feel-good ethos of a family feature film, representing exactly the kind of tie-in emerging brands want to explore. Another success story is Starface (which is looking to rake in roughly US$90 million in annual revenue this year), with its popular patches and spot stickers that cover up pimples and absorb fluid to reduce inflammation.

Seeing a way to broaden the scope of self-expression with kids brands, the company has struck licensing deals with Sanrio (Hello Kitty), Sesame Workshop (Sesame Street) and Nickelodeon (SpongeBob SquarePants). "Starface's partnerships have been an interesting case study for YAWN to dive into in terms of licensing," says Tersigni, who was among Starface's early investors.

Toronto's Matte Equation Cosmetics—another new skincare player on a mission to keep its line clean and sophisticated—has baked kids brand licensing into its strategy right from the start. Launched by corporate communications executive Matt Celestial, the company has already locked down a major deal with one such IP for its tween-friendly Timetable line that's launching worldwide this month (with products priced between US$20 and US$34). Due to the nature of this deal, Matte was not at liberty to disclose the name of the brand at press time.

"We are seeking out [more] licensing partnerships with kids IP owners, and are currently in talks with some of our favorite brands growing up," says Celestial.

Beauty—which includes skincare—ranked as the second-most popular online shopping category with Gen Alpha in a spring 2024 report published by the content moderation company WebPurify. But despite these young consumers' heavy participation in online culture, including shopping, there's also value in reaching them in person.

> It's not about transforming yourself; it's about having fun and feeling great with safe formulas.
>
> —Tara Tersigni, YAWN

"I do think mall culture is coming back with these kids a little bit," says Tersigni, hinting at what might be a long-term strategy for a broader YAWN world that's a reinvention of Claire's. "I'd love to go into room decor, stationery and all the things that kids use alongside beauty."

Bubble Skincare developed a line of Inside Out 2 skincare kits that each reflect one of protagonist Riley's emotions

Photo by Stephanie Gonot

Her observation is echoed in new global Gen Alpha research (Razorfish and GWI report, June 2024) showing that 83% of this age group values brands that have physical stores.

Aging down with purpose

Much like Tersigni avoids appearance-based marketing, Celestial's goal is to give young consumers a brand that can be their starting point for learning self-care and healthy skin routines. To achieve this, he consulted with industry experts and distilled the Timetable range to offer just a cleanser, a moisturizer and sheet masks.

"We did explore pimple patches [initially], but one of our advisors felt strongly that we needed to encourage this age group to focus on skincare practices, rather than promising them no pimples," he says. "We want to partner with brands that are able to inspire younger audiences to take care of themselves as a whole in the spectrum of well-being, from having great sleep practices, to eating well [and] moving their bodies."

Well-being is playing a more prominent role in the youth skincare industry, though risks still loom for the youngest shoppers. Jeffy, who runs a TikTok account with 44,000 followers, frequently posts content to correct misinformation and inappropriate skincare practices that kids often post online. And in April, California assembly member Alex Lee introduced Bill 2491, which sought to block the sale of anti-aging skincare products to kids under age 13. (In the end, however, the bill failed to move forward.)

With plenty of prospects for licensing partnerships in this fast-growing sector, it's vital that kids IP owners carefully vet the brands they choose to partner with to ensure they are truly age-appropriate. For example, brands that offer sun protection as part of their strategy to cater to tweens/teens are a green flag for Jeffy, who also outlines some concerns to watch out for.

"I would be nervous if products contained active ingredients like vitamin C, retinol, niacinamide or abrasive scrubs," she says. "This demonstrates to me that the company has no idea how to support young skin, and doesn't know or care about the risk when using these ingredients on young, healthy skin." k

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Logging off

For the first time in 30 years, Dubit is seeing drops in device ownership and screen time.

BY: DAVID KLEEMAN

Every new report for the past 30 years has shown a rise in screen time among children—to an almost incomprehensible degree. But now we're seeing a downward trend. Screen time for kids under age 15 has actually decreased between 2023 and 2024.

The previous growth was not especially surprising. Governments, researchers and NGOs have tracked screen usage since at least the mid-1990s. A chart created by Meta.ai* suggests that in 1995, preschoolers ages two to five spent under an hour on screens each day; six- to 12-year-olds around 2.5 hours; and young teens 3.5 hours. By 2010, daily screen time ranged from two hours for toddlers, to six hours for teens. And by 2024, it had risen to between 3.5 and 7.5 hours.

In the late 1990s, television cornered virtually all kid screen time, except for some small amounts they were spending on desktop computers or gaming consoles. In 2010, TV still dominated the scene, but mobile devices had arrived (the iPhone in 2007 and iPad in 2010) and were starting to be used significantly by tweens and teens.

Now, young people are immersed in media from very early ages, thanks to "pass-back" smartphones and tablets with educational apps, linear/streaming/YouTube viewing, gaming, messaging, social media and more. With so many options, who wouldn't expect screen use to keep increasing? We certainly did—until our latest Dubit Trends April 2024 wave indicated otherwise.

Data in this article was drawn from surveys we conducted with at least 1,000 children in 11 different countries (and more in the US and the UK). Kids in these two nations—plus Australia, France, Germany, Italy and Spain—are questioned on a yearly basis. And we cover Brazil, India, Malaysia and Mexico every other year. Here's what we found when we checked in with them this past spring.

DEVICE OWNERSHIP

Dubit Trends routinely asks kids and teens which devices they share with family members and which ones they own themselves. A widespread drop in smartphone and tablet ownership was surprising, given the longitudinal trends we've always observed.

For kids ages two to 15, smartphone ownership decreased in all markets, and most notably in Malaysia and Mexico. Tablet ownership fell everywhere except Italy. This slowdown was especially pronounced with tweens (ages 10 to 13), the cohort where we usually see a switchover to the independence of getting their own phone for the first time.

Meanwhile, TV ownership dropped sharply in Mexico and Australia, but rose slightly in Italy, Brazil and the US (a lift that's a bit of a mystery to us, in all honesty). Having a TV in their rooms used to be a rite of passage for kids, giving them the freedom to watch what and when they wanted. But today, mobile technologies with video-viewing apps and platforms make owning a TV less important.

PC/laptop ownership is holding steadier, decreasing in some markets (UK: 37% in 2023 to 34% in 2024) and increasing slightly in others (US: 49% in 2023 to 52% in 2024). For tweens and teens, in particular, the laptop tends to be a "necessity" device—used mostly for schoolwork and some gaming—and therefore is less susceptible to sudden swings.

SCREEN TIME

Overall, screen time among two- to 15-year-olds was down in all countries but one, and the decreases were consistent across every age group. The one counter-trending country (the UK) showed only a slight increase in screen time among six- to eight-year-olds. Otherwise, the drop was more or less the same across all measured devices, suggesting

a broader shift in behavior, not a narrowing platform or content trend.

Notably, there were two specific types of usage that posted exceptional declines:

App gaming

The overall proportion of kids gaming on apps has decreased substantially. In the UK, gaming among two- to 15-year-olds dropped from 84% in 2023 to 79% in 2024. Driving this change were two- to five-year-olds—a demo for which "gaming" usually means educational apps provided at parents' convenience—with usage down from 68% in 2023 to 59% in 2024.

Linear television

Traditional TV viewing decreased in the most recent wave, except in Australia. And the US decline was notably large (56% in 2023 to 48% in 2024).

WHY THE DROP?

We've got a few theories, some of which point to an ongoing decline, while others suggest these numbers will stabilize or trend upward again.

Device ownership

During the pandemic, we said that "down on the corner went up on the server," disrupting young people's schooling and social life. Work-from-home families competed for devices and bandwidth. Uninterrupted access became critical, so families bought the equipment their children needed.

With kids free to enjoy school and play in person again in the wake of the pandemic, families feel less need to replace or buy tech. For example, Q1 2024 showed a 10% year-over-year drop in iPhone sales, according to Apple.

Tablets are mostly a preschool device, but children likely hung onto them for longer during the pandemic. The current ownership decline occurs around age 10, suggesting that they're ready to set them aside sooner these days.

The small rise in TV ownership in the US may reflect changing content habits. In most countries, YouTube represents the third largest share of usage on bigger screens, behind SVOD and linear. In July 2024, Nielsen declared YouTube the first streaming service to corner 10% of all US viewing on TVs.

We need to study whether the "techlash" is having an impact on youth phone ownership. Organizations like Wait Until 8th in the US, and Kids For Now in the UK are urging families to hold off on giving children smartphones. And in Europe and the US, an increasing number of schools are banning the devices.

Jonathan Haidt's book *The Anxious Generation* (despite critical dissections) and the US Surgeon General's 2023 *Advisory on Social Media and Youth Mental Health* may be leading some parents to rethink their children's habits (if not their own).

Screen time

In 2020, Dubit projected that young people would set aside devices after the pandemic in order to catch up on all the in-person play and socializing they had sorely missed.

We reassured media companies that "it's not you, it's them," and that kids would eventually return to their previous habits. Now, maybe they're enjoying a new balance in how they spend their time.

Or maybe not. Screens have become so enmeshed in young people's lives that perhaps self-estimations of screen time are no longer accurate. A fish moves without consciousness of water, and children navigate their saturated world of screens, games and social media in ways that might make it difficult to recognize the extent of their engagement.

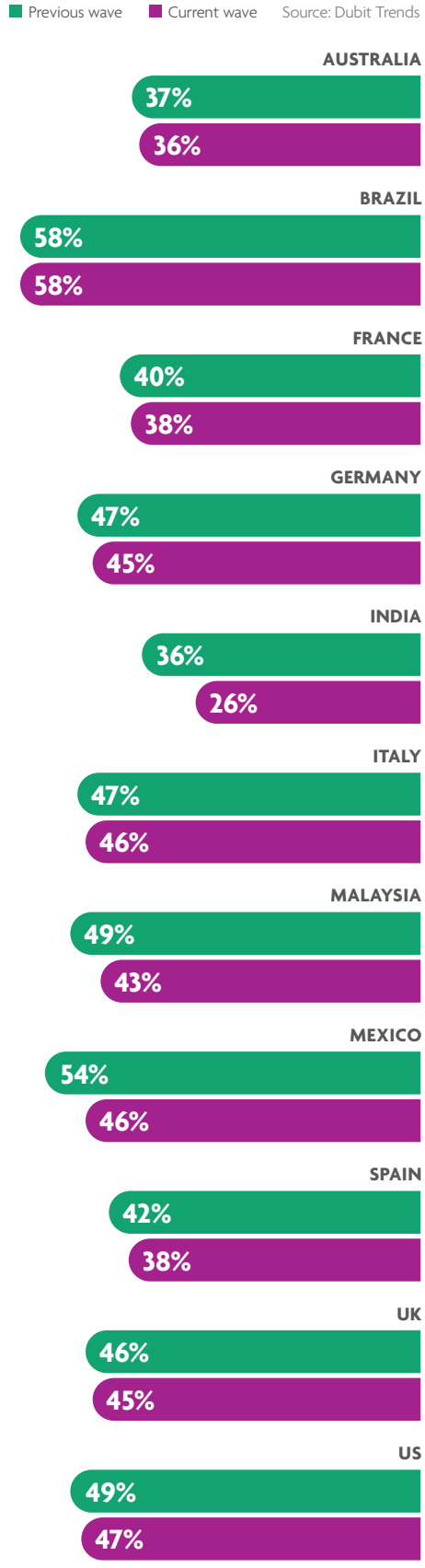
So what's the bottom line here? Well, we don't know yet. It's important to note that, for now, this is only a snapshot. With just one wave of data to work with, it's far from enough to establish a true trend—but it's important enough to merit some attention. And we'll be watching this space closely to see what time has to tell. K

*Surveys of "screen time" have changed substantially and repeatedly with technology and platform innovation over the past 30 years, so Dubit used Meta's AI to synthesize an estimate of growth since 1995, across all available mediums.

DAVID KLEEMAN is a strategist, analyst, author and speaker who has worked in children's media for more than 35 years. He is SVP of global trends at metaverse studio and research consultancy Dubit.

Smartphone ownership

Kids ages two to 15



With its new AR board game Finders Creepers, Micro Games of America is looking to expand far beyond its physical toys to reach kids who have their own phones

Facing a new reality

Kidcos are turning to AR to reach more demos and engage them more effectively.

BY: RYAN TUCHOW

A bunch of kids head into a haunted mansion on a mission to hunt monsters. They find the tools they need to trap the killer clown and catch the giant spider. Their plan is working perfectly, and not a single one has lost their soul...but then the monsters flip the script and start showing up in the kids' homes!

You might be thinking that this sounds like a pitch for a spooky new tween TV series, but you'd be wrong. It's an experience that MGA Entertainment has created with its board game *Finders Creepers*, thanks to the evolving power of augmented reality (AR).

"AR allows us to bring the game to life in ways that were previously unimaginable, creating an experience that is not only fun, but also highly social and interactive," says MGA's chief marketing officer Josh Hackbarth. "More and more often, kids are looking for experiences that blend the physical and digital worlds, and AR offers that bridge."

That's exactly what happens in *Finders Creepers*: Kids ages eight to 13 role-play as investigators from a paranormal detective agency who are searching for gear and capturing monsters. During the game, the monsters escape from the board, and players must then use the AR app to hunt them down in their own homes.

MGA's Micro Games of America division launched the game in August in order to reach the 62% of American kids who have their own phones (according to July data from Statista) and engage them with play that goes well beyond the company's roots in manufacturing physical toys.

Finders Creepers starts out as a monster-hunting board game, but then shifts over to phones, making it look like the monsters are haunting the players' own homes

This is part of a broader strategy... to reach new demos and others who might not be engaged.

—Victoria Lozano, Crayola

Augmenting the board game biz

In its most basic sense, augmented reality is technology that superimposes content—often videos and audio recordings—onto the real world through the cameras, speakers and video screens embedded in smartphones and tablets.

Finders Creepers is MGA's first title in what will eventually be a whole line of App-Vanced board games that employ AR to make games easier to play and more engaging, says Hackbarth.

"We believe this line will bring younger video game fans into tabletop gaming. We're already in development with first-class licensed properties and new game mechanics to take this line to the next level."

A princess in your room

MGA isn't alone in embracing AR to entice difficult-to-reach demos. Disney is also doing so with its new *Portal to the Princesses* experience, which also launched in August. In this story-based game, kids can go to a website on their phone and make it look like a Disney princess is in their room. After choosing one of four live-action characters, they can then play their way through a choose-your-own-adventure story, traveling across the ocean with Moana or helping Rapunzel paint a portrait, for example.

Disney released the free experience as part of a multi-year campaign called Create Your World, which offers a wide variety of new products and content specifically designed to tap into the popularity of the Mouse House's royal characters. (In the US, Disney Princess is the most popular franchise among girls ages three to 11, according to research the company conducted last year.)

Disney created *Portal to the Princesses* to tap into this popularity and give kids a more interactive experience with the characters. The ultimate goal is motivating them to seek out the princesses in other content and products, or in real life at Disney theme parks.

Putting the AR in art

AR isn't new—San Francisco-based developer Niantic's breakout title *Pokémon GO* was a huge success when it launched in 2016, reaching 232 million players that year. And its continued popularity drove US$566 million in revenue from in-app purchases in 2023, according to Statista.

Despite the buzz *Pokémon GO* brought to AR, few companies have been able to replicate its success. But they keep trying, seeing real value in the benefits the technology can deliver.

For Crayola, its investment in AR is less about creating a blockbuster app and more about building on the way kids play, increasing the time young artists spend being creative, and attracting consumers who aren't currently picking up its products.

One of the trickiest groups for the crayon-maker to reach is those who are not artistically inclined. But AR is helping Crayola get over this hurdle, says EVP of marketing Victoria Lozano.

After testing AR for several years, some of the company's latest efforts have been incorporated into two drawing kits that both launched in November 2023—the My Gallery Marker Set and the Mandala Mood Pencil Set. Developed and manufactured in partnership with Boston-based techco Cupixel, these sets are designed for kids ages eight and up. Users simply put their phone in a stand, and augmented reality shows them what to trace on their pad, making it foolproof to create great art.

"This is part of a broader strategy for Crayola to use technology to reach new demos and others who might not be engaged," says Lozano. "With AR, we're able to democratize the ability to create, and it also boosts kids' confidence because the output is of such a high quality."

The sets come with a 30-day free subscription to Cupixel's same-name COPPA/GDPR-compliant art app, which features a gallery of drawings kids can trace, recorded instructional videos from experts, and a community for sharing finished masterpieces. Once the free

Crayola's new drawing sets target artistically challenged kids with a phone-based AR solution that helps them create masterpieces

subscription runs out, the cost is US$7.99 a month to keep using the app.

Crayola doesn't share financial data, but its key performance indicators—including engagement, retention and financials—have all been solid for both products, says Brian Nemeckay, senior manager of Crayola Interactive. In fact, the AR sets have been so successful that the company plans to expand the line with additional SKUs.

The arts & crafts giant has also been experimenting with several other forms of AR, incorporating the tech into its Crayola Experience locations (where kids can see their drawings come to life) and the app for its Scribble Scrubbie brand (that lets kids color fish toys and then watch them swim around in the real world).

These efforts are aimed at building on existing play patterns and providing kids with a more robust experience than they can have at home, says Lozano.

Seeing their creations come to life can help kids develop confidence in their artistic skills, and Crayola is focused on challenging the perception that some people just aren't creative or can't draw. More broadly, the company's Campaign for Creativity marketing push has been running since April and has already racked up 4.5 billion impressions, says Lozano.

Putting a pin in it

While Crayola is using AR to innovate in the arts & crafts category, Pinfinity sees this tech as the key to breathing new life into the collectible pins market.

Based in San Diego and London, the company makes AR-powered pins that play animation and music when viewed through the Pinfinity app, as well as linking to exclusive content, products, games and sites.

The pin market was hot in the '80s and '90s, when trading and collecting them was at a peak. But that popularity declined in the face of new trends and media formats, says Matthew Arevalo, Pinfinity's co-founder and chief experience officer. While a base level of interest has endured, the market needed something to re-energize it.

"And that's the power of combining pins with AR," he says. "It brings a new dimension to the collectible experience, making it more relevant and exciting for today's audience."

Brand owners seem to agree with that assessment. Disney (*Deadpool & Wolverine*), The Jim Henson Company (*Labyrinth*) and Bethesda Softworks (*Fallout*) have all signed on as Pinfinity licensing partners, and as a result, the pin-maker has seen "significant growth" in its direct-to-consumer sales, says Arevalo.

Pinfinity is also working with Hasbro to produce Magic: The Gathering and Dungeons & Dragons pins. And it's currently in talks about adding more licenses, including Hasbro's most popular kids brands, Arevalo adds.

"By integrating AR into traditional products like pins, brands can extend their reach to younger, tech-savvy consumers who might not have been as engaged with more conventional merchandise," he says. "What excites me most about AR is its ability to create a multi-generational experience. Kids today are digital natives—they expect interactivity in everything they do." k

Pinfinity sees AR as a way to breathe new life into the collectible pin market

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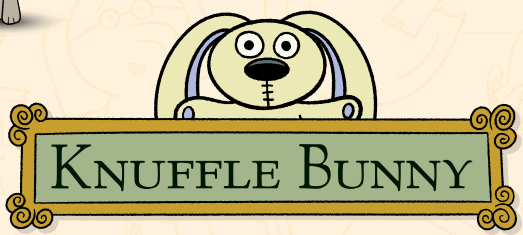

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The deep end of digital

New storytelling paradigms are reaching kids in places and ways that are taking the industry in a whole new direction.

From digital-first content to interactive TV and games, the kids entertainment industry is in the midst of a monumental shift that's seeing companies working with new and innovative technologies and unconventional forms of storytelling, aiming to capture the attention and loyalty of next-gen audiences.

In part one of this special report, *Kidscreen* explores what's driving this future-focused content strategy, how some of the most successful companies are monetizing their digital-first IPs, and how they're targeting users to ensure long-term success. And in our second feature, we take a look at the interactive tools that kids producers are beginning to employ as a means of taking their shows and games to the next level.

Whatever the future holds, chances are pretty good that it's going to be digital and interactive.

As the commissioning downturn continues to affect the global kids entertainment business, content producers are increasingly turning to digital platforms like Roblox, YouTube and Fortnite for brand monetization opportunities. Every IP and platform is different, so there are no silver bullets for success. But media consultant Peter Robinson of Gone With explains what drives the long-term brand health of digital-first IPs. Then we take a deeper dive into the digital strategies that are fueling some of the most successful kids companies today, including Moonbug, Blue Zoo, Toca Boca and Cloudco.

Inside the consumer funnel

Why interest and desire are the strongest indicators of long-term brand health for digital-first IPs.

BY: PETER ROBINSON

In the digital-first content world, constantly aligning with your audience's habits and preferences is the key to building brands. But figuring out how to do this is the real challenge.

One benefit of working with digital platforms is the sheer volume of demographic and viewership data they collect and make available to their channel owners. But that amount of information can be a blessing and a curse. Too much can lead to decision paralysis—or the opposite, decision overload. Understanding how to interpret and work with so much data is critical for success—and there are a few digital-first brands that seem to have mastered the challenge. CoComelon, Gabby's Dollhouse, Ms. Rachel and Angry Birds are all strong examples of brands that perform extremely well outside of their platforms of origin, thanks in no small part to their approaches to data management.

FINDING, ENGAGING AND RETAINING THE MOST VALUABLE USERS

Despite the emerging power of AI, fueled by the big-data revolution, I often find myself returning to proven models when I'm looking for insight. A good example of this is understanding the audience or consumer funnel.

Traditionally, brands have been monetized by selling ad space to large, static audiences, which brought in enough fans to support consumer product sales. However, with today's vast content choices, the return on investment from ads has diminished, and the CP funnel has shrunk. To combat this, we must optimize two key aspects:

- **Cost per acquisition (CPA):** The cost of acquiring a new fan
- **Cost per retention (CPR or CPF):** The cost of retaining a fan

The ultimate goal is for a content brand to transition from seeking an audience to being sought by the audience—a key shift in becoming a tentpole brand. At Gone With, we often use traditional funnel models like AIDA (awareness, interest, desire, action), which applies across platforms and brands. Among these stages, interest and desire are the strongest indicators of long-term brand health.

AWARENESS is about maximizing the number of eyeballs viewing the content. In the world of YouTube, for example, this might be measured by total minutes viewed. However, in an era of fragmented content and declining ad value, this metric alone is insufficient and only works with scale. You will always have to spend $1 to get back $1.02, or $1.05 if you do well. To convert awareness into genuine interest, consistency in messaging and content delivery is crucial.

And with content so fragmented these days, it isn't a case of finding your audience once and then having them continue to return to you. You need to find them once, then re-find them and probably re-find them again. You have to form that outreach habit—or more accurately, you have to hope that the platform's algorithm will get the hint and promote your content to your viewers.

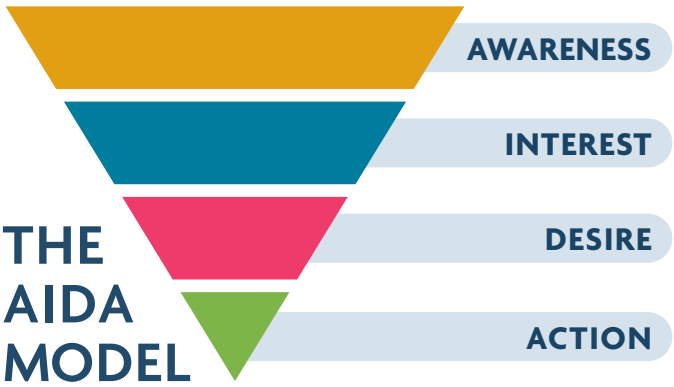
One of the main marketing messages at this stage is consistency: "We are here, at this time, showing this thing that you like."

What we want to consider is the conversion rate from awareness to interest. This would show that we have been effective at finding fans in the marketing stage. To measure this, we can try activating small pieces of marketing across different platforms, or we can try different marketing tones or messaging on the same platform.

By isolating activations, we are able to measure which ones best convert into returning viewers. For example, we can A/B test two different images on YouTube or social media. Or we can target different demographics with the same messaging to see which converts the most effectively. By simplifying the question, we are able to accurately answer it.

INTEREST is reflected in metrics like returning viewers on platforms such as YouTube. It's not just about driving initial engagement (watch time); it's about ensuring that those viewers return, too. This also is where iterative A/B testing of content and marketing material comes into play, helping to refine strategies that attract the right audience. Success at this stage means effectively acquiring and engaging viewers who are more likely to become loyal fans, thus lowering the CPA over time.

Angry Birds is one good example of a brand that transcends its platform of origin



By measuring the performance of the content, we can begin to identify which "content traits" are most effective—not at gaining minutes viewed, but at supporting repeat views.

Along with tried-and-tested funnel models, there are smart AI tools that can identify content patterns to support the analysis of content performance, such as Scriptsee (script analysis), Wantent AI (analyzing content) and Vionlabs AB (contextual content tagging).

By understanding what drives repeat consumption of a video or channel, we are able to tailor the most appropriate episodes, characters and formats (e.g. shorts) for our "fan" audience.

DESIRE is perhaps the most critical modern metric. In the past, knowing a channel number by heart indicated strong brand loyalty. Today, the equivalent is organic search—how often people actively seek out your content. Growth in organic search volume is a key indicator of brand strength because it reflects content that resonates so strongly with audiences that they seek it out without prompting.

How many people type in some or all of our key search words to find the content? Or say the words "Peppa" or "Bluey" to Alexa? Growing this metric in terms of absolute numbers—going from 100 searches in month one to 200 in month two, or improving the percentage of total views from 0.8% in month one to 1.2% in month two, for example—is key to the growth of a brand. Why? Because this is when the cost of acquisition and retention declines. Organic isn't paid for. You have created content that people want to find, rather than content that needs to find people.

Tracking and steadily growing organic search from day one is essential. It demonstrates that you're building a loyal audience and reducing future costs, ultimately creating a sustainable, successful digital-first brand.

PETER ROBINSON is the founder of Gone With, a consultancy focused on early adopters and new markets.

Blue Zoo's Blocks franchise, including *Numberblocks* (pictured), *Alphablocks* and *Colourblocks*, is surpassing 25 million daily views on YouTube—more than double its 2023 tally

Building blocks

How London-based Blue Zoo is laying the foundation for long-term success by bolstering its digital business.

BY: JEREMY DICKSON

For more than two decades, Blue Zoo founders Oli Hyatt, Adam Shaw and Tom Box have maintained the studio's reputation as one of the UK's leading animation producers, delivering a wide range kids content like *Go Jetters* and *The Adventures of Paddington* to broadcasters and platforms including CBeebies, Nickelodeon, Netflix and Amazon.

Aiming to thrive for another 20 years, the studio is doubling down on its digital business under digital director Stephanie Gauld, whose previous roles have included head of digital at Acamar Films (*Bing*) and head of Disney Online Studios EMEA.

When Gauld joined in 2019, Blue Zoo only had five free and premium Blocks brand apps, and just four externally managed YouTube channels. Its social media platforms were also managed externally at the

Game mode activated

Moonbug Entertainment is betting big on digital games to bring franchises like CoComelon and Blippi to an even wider audience.

Just when parents thought preschool hits *CoComelon* and *Blippi* from Candle Media's Moonbug Entertainment couldn't get any bigger, the company decided to enter the digital gaming space to best cater to the ever-evolving desires of kids.

London-based Moonbug's new digital strategy kicked off in fall 2022 when it launched its first-ever video game, *Play with JJ*, on Nintendo Switch. Published by Outright Games and developed by SockMonkey Studios, the console title is based on YouTube phenom *CoComelon* and lets users play as the show's popular four-year-old protagonist JJ, exploring his house and garden, and participating in activities like gardening and hide-and-seek.

Well-known for helping preschoolers learn through catchy versions of classic children's songs, Moonbug added more than 20 songs from *CoComelon* to the game, including the familiar tunes "Old MacDonald" and "Itsy Bitsy Spider."

CoComelon's breadth of music and the ways in which the IP lets kids interact with songs is a key differentiating factor for Moonbug's latest game, *CoComelon - Kids Learn & Play*,

time. But since then, all digital management has gradually been brought in house.

"Now, in partnership with Alphablocks Limited, Blue Zoo has a multichannel network of 14 YouTube channels; an app library that's grown to 16 free and premium titles; we've launched six individual language channels as well as multi-language audio streams on individual channels, and subscription apps with VOD and interactive content for deeper experiences; and we've built out our digital marketing and social media," Gauld says. "We've seen a lot of growth in all of these areas, but it still feels like we're in startup mode."

Blue Zoo currently has more than 22 million subscribers and upwards of 14 billion lifetime views across all of its YouTube channels.

The studio is also in the middle of launching Blue Zoo Connected, a new initiative led by Hyatt that lets the company's animation, licensing, sales and digital divisions work together more collaboratively on launch and monetization strategies.

"These days, it's a business of scale and layers, beginning with an audience-first approach," says Gauld.

The crown jewel in Blue Zoo's digital roadmap is its BAFTA-winning educational preschool franchise Blocks. Created by Joe Elliot and produced by Alphablocks Limited in partnership with Blue Zoo, *Alphablocks* debuted on CBeebies in 2010, spawning *Numberblocks* in 2017 and *Colourblocks* in 2022. All three shows are still going strong, having recently been renewed by the Beeb until 2027.

Earlier this year, the Blocks YouTube channels were generating around 25 million to 33 million views a day, up from roughly 10 million in 2023, says Gauld.

"We've applied lots of different strategies, but optimization is a really big one," she notes. "We have a team that's constantly analyzing performance, and we also work closely with the YouTube Kids publishing calendar, tying in with key moments throughout the year like summer holidays, the back-to-school period, Halloween and Christmas, for example."

YouTube Kids Shorts has been a go-to platform for Blue Zoo to optimize short-form content (one minute or less), while the studio's long-form content on YouTube is usually eight to 10 minutes or longer. "We try to avoid those three- to five-minute lengths, as they aren't great in terms of how we see them supported by the YouTube algorithm," says Gauld.

Blue Zoo also tracks key performance indicators such as views, engagement and revenue. "We look for potential revenue-making projects to ideally break even within two years, but when we back an IP where the data proves there is strong engagement, we will keep building this," she explains. "But engagement is a big one. We'll look at average percentage viewed or the time that children are not spending with a piece of content [a.k.a. skipping over]. This obviously differs by platform, brand and age, and it depends on the depth of content, but engagement is a massive indicator of how well something's performing—even more so than views."

One of the biggest challenges remains discoverability, according to Gauld. "It's only becoming more intense, so lining up your marketing and optimization to get the biggest buzz around a brand is key."

Her advice to new studios just starting out on their digital content journey is to not take a half-hearted approach. "I don't think you can try to make a little bit of digital content and see if it works, because it's most likely not going to work."

Gauld stresses the importance of working with somebody who's done it before; who has a proven track record of success; and who will help you work out a strong strategy that's relevant to your audience and brand, and that supports a vertical of content that can be iterated and expanded upon.

"Find someone who can help you create the roadmap," she says. "And always go in with a long-term vision." k

says Ed Barton, VP of games and interactive. Launched in August 2024, the subscription app is Moonbug's first mobile game and also its first self-published title, offering more of an open-ended, sandbox space for kids.

"It stands out because it's a 2D-animated version of the CG-animated CoComelon universe, but also because it's different from other learning apps, which very rarely have full integration with a brand's music," says Barton. "For us, it was really important that it was actually a fully interactive platform and not simply a video platform."

In terms of its rollout strategy for games, Moonbug had a plan to release a string of products over the course of a year. Following the release of *Play with JJ,* Netflix reached out to add the game to its gaming platform in 2023. And Moonbug's second game, *Blippi's Playground*, landed on Roblox the same year.

"Even though we were developing our own mobile apps at the same time as Playground, it came out first because the Roblox development cycle is so much faster," says Barton.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 60

Moonbug's latest digital game based on the hugely popular CoComelon franchise, *CoComelon - Kids Learn & Play* is its first self-published game and first mobile app

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 59

"On Roblox, you generally look to put a product out to market after maybe 12 weeks of development, and then iterate over time. Whereas with mobile apps, we wanted to take a bit more time to develop them."

For the latest *Blippi's Playground* update, Moonbug decided to change the mechanics of the game in a way that would drive more traffic to *Blippi* on YouTube, and then back to Roblox. Rebranded as *Find the Blippis*, the goal of the game is to locate 100 different variations of Blippi (such as Blippi disguised as the Statue of Liberty, or as a blimp called Blimppi).

"For the YouTube-to-Roblox link, we created YouTube content that gives you clues to help you in the game, and we're creating game content that will make you want to watch YouTube," says Barton.

As for how Moonbug's first three games are performing, Barton can't disclose numbers, but says the company is "very happy" and that the titles are generally tracking above expectations.

That said, he notes that on Roblox, there are generally lower development costs and lower revenue compared to mobile, which has a relatively larger market size.

"For us, it's really about going after something when we know there's sufficient market demand, and then sizing the investment we make appropriately," says Barton. "The biggest opportunity is making quality platform-first products that are safe spaces for kids. So for Roblox, it's making something that the community really loves; and on mobile, it's making something that parents really love." **JD**

Moonbug's rebranded *Find the Blippis* Roblox game is designed to drive traffic to the Blippi's Roblox Gaming Videos YouTube channel, while the YouTube content provides clues that send viewers back to the game

***Toca Boca World* recently expanded into tween territory, partnering with global popstar Conan Gray for the company's first-ever music collab**

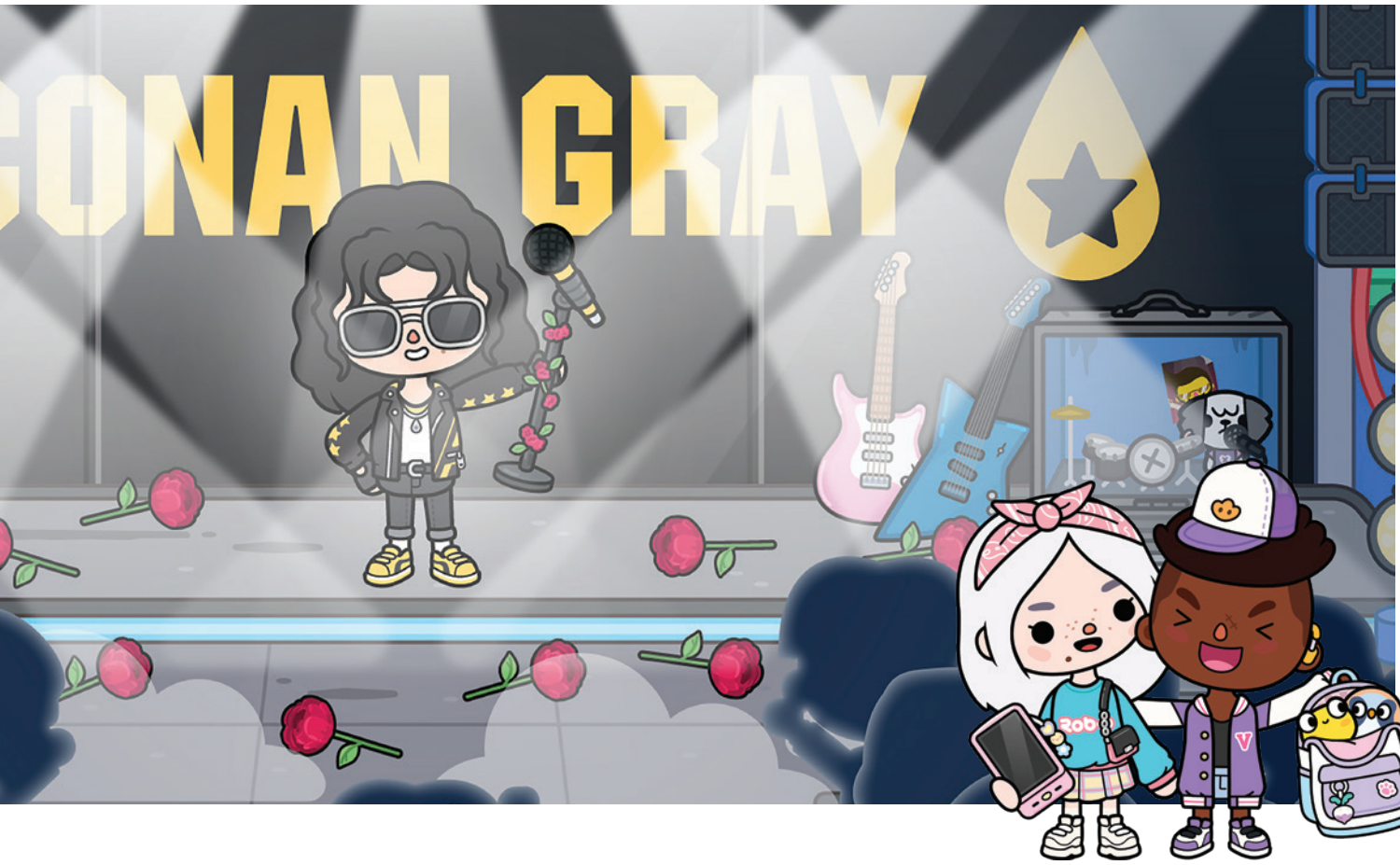
Forever playful

Toca Boca is growing with its audience, while staying true to its mission of creating safe, open-ended worlds that encourage exploration, creativity and expression.

When Swedish kids app developer Toca Boca launched in 2011, a big part of its mission was to foster generations of playful people. Nearly 50 apps and more than 70 million monthly active users later, it's safe to say the company's vision is coming to fruition.

Acquired by Canadian toymaker Spin Master in 2016, the developer is wrapping up a pivotal year that saw it expand from focusing on the preschool and kids demos to wade into tween territory by teaming up this summer with global popstar Conan Gray for Toca's first-ever music collaboration.

Designed to empower self-expression, the partnership featured a Conan Gray takeover



of *Toca Boca World*'s in-game music festival stage, as well as a new themed music player and customizable digital items players could use to craft their own unique Conan Gray-inspired experiences and stories.

This isn't the first time Toca Boca has activated co-branded digital items within its biggest app. Partnerships with Hello Kitty and SpongeBob SquarePants launched in 2023 with successful returns. And when the company re-released a Hello Kitty furniture pack in January, it generated more than US$900,000 of revenue in a week, said Spin Master president and CEO Max Rangel in the company's first-quarter earnings call. Although no figures have been revealed yet, fans are also "responding positively" to the Conan Gray collab, Rangel noted in his summary of Q2.

"When we listen to our players, meet their needs and find relevant content they will enjoy, their positive reactions are materialized across the business," says Marc De Vellis, Spin Master's global head of studios and digital games. "We're always looking for opportunities to enhance the experience and drive the highest levels of engagement possible because the center of monetization is strong engagement."

In fact, engagement has remained near *Toca Boca World*'s all-time high—the app's monthly active user base was up 3% to 61 million at the end of this year's second quarter.

Elsewhere in the Toca Boca universe, the company's first-ever multiplayer 3D online game *Toca Boca Days* was released this year, tapping into the growing tween gaming category worldwide.

After soft-launching in Australia and New Zealand this summer, the title generated "healthy organic installs," according to the company's Q1 results. *Toca Boca Days* will roll out internationally in the coming months on a market-by-market basis, beginning with Canada, Sweden, the UK and Germany.

"*Toca Days* is part of a larger strategic expansion of our player network that includes attracting new age groups to our digital games," says De Vellis. "So from an early age into their teenage years, Toca Boca plays a key recurring role in players' lives. Our ability to monetize across a broad age spectrum is unique because typical brands or franchises usually churn once a player ages out."

Another growth driver for Toca Boca has been subscriptions. Led by Piknik—an US$11.99 monthly curated collection of award-winning apps from Toca Boca, its subsidiary Sago Mini and kids app-maker Originator—the company's subscription business increased by 8% from 399,000 subscribers in December last year to 430,000 subscribers at the end of Q1 2024. Drilling down, Piknik and Sago Mini claimed 374,000 subscribers, while Spin's PAW Patrol Academy accounted for 56,000.

"We've seen healthy year-over-year growth because parents are finding the value and telling other parents, which boosts our organic traffic," notes De Vellis.

Looking at additional opportunities, YouTube and other social channels will be a focus for Toca Boca in the future, he adds. "We want to tell stories as part of the Toca Boca brand, and we also want our large community to tell their stories on social channels."

As for the company's biggest challenge, De Vellis says meeting the needs of so many players around the world takes a large effort, but it's a responsibility Toca Boca doesn't take lightly. "Staying relevant to kids for not only the next decade, but for generations to come, is the purest opportunity. That's what's special." **JD**

The Care Bears have taken a big step this year by entering open-world kids universes, including Afterverse's PK XD platform

Meeting fans where they are

Cloudco is evolving its flagship Care Bears brand into a multi-platform juggernaut to connect with next-gen fans and nostalgia-seekers.

Name-drop just about any digital platform that kids are flocking to these days, and there's a pretty good chance you'll run into a Care Bear.

Over the past few years, Cloudco Entertainment—owner of the iconic Care Bears brand—has significantly evolved its digital kids content strategy, shifting from focusing primarily on successful linear shows to developing multi-platform IPs that enhance fan experiences and promote global growth, says Ian Lambur, EVP of content strategy, co-productions, global distribution and digital.

This year alone, Care Bears hugged their way into three high-performing, open-world kids universes for the first time, with launches on Roblox, Fortnite (Epic Games) and PK XD (Afterverse).

For its established brands like Care Bears, Cloudco employs a digital strategy that usually prioritizes exposure over direct content monetization.

"This might mean engaging with newer content platforms like Roblox, Fortnite, casual apps and various metaverses, in addition to traditional TV content spaces," explains Lambur.

If Cloudco identifies an IP as primarily content-driven (or just a great show)—particularly if it's a brand-new IP—its approach differs slightly in that discoverability becomes the key driver. Its strategy in these scenarios is to meet viewers where they are, and also pilot them to where Cloudco wants them to be. "This approach leads us to explore every feasible platform and enhance our presence with strategic social media content," says Lambur.

Cloudco's strategy is to take incremental steps to establish a new IP's presence and potential, with the initial focus on securing collaborations with existing and established apps or games. "This allows a new IP to make short-term appearances that not only enhance the performance of the collaborating brand or game, but also provide the brands themselves with success stories and valuable data."

Once a solid foundation is established, it increases the chances of the new IP expanding on its own across digital platforms like apps, YouTube, Roblox, streaming services, gaming, AVOD, online platforms and social media, adds Lambur.

For newcomers to digital work, he notes the importance of distributing the effort over time. "Unlike traditional series, where much of the work happens up front, digital projects demand ongoing attention long after the initial deal is done," he says. "The real work begins with the continuous cycle of managing, marketing, growing and promoting because digital content like apps, games or virtual worlds need regular updates to stay fresh and competitive."

For example, Cloudco dropped new features, challenges and thematic elements into its *Care Bears* game on PK XD in August after initially launching Care Bears gameplay on the platform in April. For its debut, nearly 10 million users engaged with the content, which was an "overwhelming response," according to Cloudco. Since launching in 2019 across iOS, Android and desktop platforms, there have been nearly a billion installs on PK XD worldwide.

Looking to the future, Lambur says the biggest challenge in terms of digital strategy—particularly with legacy brands like Care Bears and Madballs—is deciding which opportunities to pursue and which ones to let go, since Cloudco's digital initiatives need to align with broader brand strategies and complement other efforts.

"It's crucial to choose wisely. From a monetization perspective, digital can be hit or miss—many initiatives might not yield high financial returns, while a few break through and succeed spectacularly," he notes. "That said, even those efforts that don't meet financial expectations, if done well and on brand, can still add value and contribute positively to our larger brand strategy." **JD**

Becoming a part of the story

New technology allows content producers, broadcasters and streamers to draw kids into the story and give them an interactive experience.

BY: RYAN TUCHOW

This image was created with Adobe Firefly.

Couch potato. Coined in 1976 and popularized in the 1980s, this phrase refers to people (including kids) who sit slumped on the sofa, passively absorbing copious amounts of programming—and ads—on TV. It may be used less often these days, but the term best describes a type of viewer who is also becoming rarer: one who is easily reachable and who willingly spends time actually watching a ton of content.

As those voracious viewers seem to be vanishing, content producers and distributors are searching for something that will capture and retain the attention of modern-day audiences. Rather than relying on a passive experience, a few innovative companies are experimenting with content that requires active engagement, hoping to provide such a compelling experience that viewers will habitually seek out new episodes and rewatch old ones. And although it's certainly too early to say if interactive TV will prove to be a success on both the storytelling and the technology fronts, it's an attractive enough concept that the kids industry is giving it a try.

TAKING CONTROL

Viewers want to control how they consume content, whether it's a series or an ad, and Stornaway.io is one of a growing number of technology companies powering the creation and distribution of interactive TV—including a brand of choose-your-own-adventure specials representing a trend that's picking up steam, according to market research.

Interactive TV is in its infancy now, but the genre's global revenue is expected to grow from US$19.3 billion in 2023 to US$39.8 billion in 2032, according to Dataintelo.

Stornaway's co-founder and co-CEO Ru Howe has a rich background in tech that includes a stint as head of production workflows at the BBC. He's seen plenty of companies wanting to introduce interactivity but lacking the tools—or being forced to use tools that lock content into a specific platform (like Netflix). Howe wants to solve both of these problems under the auspices of the Bristol-based company he launched in 2020 with producer and co-CEO Kate Dimbleby.

Stornaway's goal is to provide producers with a tool to easily and inexpensively create interactive content. Powered by a game engine, with a simple-to-use interface and pre-designed templates, the software lets producers drag and drop interactive elements into their projects, without requiring engineering or programming experience.

So far, most of the company's business comes from corporations wanting to produce more engaging and personalized training videos. But Stornaway also expects to benefit from the TV industry's eventual swing back to more commissions and production, says Dimbleby.

Prices for the service range from a free plan with limited features—including a cap of five projects—to US$100,000 for large enterprises that need support with production and meeting broadcaster editorial standards and regulations. And there are options in between that could range from US$500 to a few thousand dollars for smaller creative teams.

Stornaway's client list includes 9 Story Media Group, Plimsoll Productions and Bristol-based Drummer TV, the producer of CBBC series *Gym Stars*.

Going behind the scenes into the lives of young UK gymnasts, *Gym Stars* has attracted a wide range of viewers who tune into the show for different reasons, depending on their ages. The younger

audience is interested in the competitions, while the older kids are keen to follow the gymnasts' relationships.

Gymnastic tutorials from the *Gym Stars* professionals have racked up millions of views on YouTube (for example, a 2019 video called "How to Handstand" has more than 5.2 million views), and CBBC premiered season five of the popular show in June 2023.

But during the pandemic, *Gym Stars* struggled to reach its six-to-13 demographic with traditional linear episodes. So Drummer turned to Stornaway to produce interactive versions of the series' live-action episodes as a proof of concept for CBBC—an experiment that worked, highlighting the potential of interactive TV for the kids industry specifically, explains Dimbleby.

Using existing footage, Drummer and Stornaway created episodes that, at set points in the story arc, let viewers choose what they wanted to see next—the competitions or the relationships. It's a new digital approach that breaks with the tradition of just splitting up an episode into multiple clips for YouTube. In the case of the Beeb, kids are already gravitating to YouTube to watch clips, and this strategy could bring them back to the broadcaster, says Dimbleby.

The initial test was successful enough that the two companies plan to continue the experiment and create additional proof-of-concept episodes using new software known as Voyager, which Stornaway released in a beta version in September.

Interactivity can be a game-changer for broadcasters and streamers, says Howe. "I'm excited to be able to open that up for people who are working on tight budgets."

REACHING EVERYONE

As a broadcaster, Channel 5 doesn't have the luxury of worrying about the reception of a single show. Instead, it has to consider its full lineup and its entire audience, including viewers with physical and mental challenges. To make its programming as accessible as possible, the UK net turned to Stornaway to create what it calls "ultra-access episodes," starting with its new preschool series *Mixmups*.

As Louise Bucknole, GM of kids & family at Paramount UK & Ireland, explains, ultra-access means kids can personalize the episode delivery in several ways, including adding subtitles and sign-language interpretation, adjusting the sound levels, and activating introductions that outline the plot. Depending on how the audience responds, it might extend this type of treatment to other productions.

> We're in a new frontier of entertainment where you're not just sitting and passively watching.
>
> —Rob Bralver, DreamFlare

"We wanted to ensure the series could be enjoyed by every child in their own way," says Bucknole. "We are really excited about these episodes for *Mixmups*. It's a totally new approach and something that has never been done before, so we're keen to see how they land with the audience and the disabled community."

Produced with Mackinnon and Saunders, *Mixmups* is a 52 x 11-minute stop-motion series about friends who imagine various pretend-play scenarios—such as delivering packages or having a machine that grants wishes. Two of the show's main characters have visible disabilities (one uses a wheelchair and the other is partially sighted, has glasses and relies on a guide dog), while the third has anxiety.

This isn't the first time Channel 5 has inserted subtitles and audio descriptions, but previous efforts didn't take into account kids with neurodiversity or visual, audio and comprehension needs. Working with Stornaway enables the broadcaster to further tailor kids' viewing experiences to be just as inclusive as the content itself, says Bucknole.

"Conventional TV access has been just subtitles, audio description and British Sign Language," adds Rebecca Atkinson, the creator of *Mixmups*. "Now, children will be able to watch the show with lower background noise, simplified visuals and additional content to [help them] access TV on their own terms."

THE NEXT FRONTIER

Fledgling San Francisco-based streamer DreamFlare AI has gotten in on the ground floor of the interactive push by creating a platform that lets producers develop—and then share—interactive content with the assistance of the other hot technology trend of the moment: AI.

"We're in a new frontier of entertainment where you're not just sitting and passively watching," says DreamFlare creative director and co-founder Rob Bralver.

The sharing aspect is vital, according to the company's other co-founder, CEO Joshua Liss. Bralver and Liss saw a need for a platform like DreamFlare after recognizing how several media trends—including a much tighter financing landscape, the rise of AI and a growing demand for personalized content—are changing the industry.

While the platform may attract its fair share of amateurs and people who are new to video production, its founders are striving to position it as a useful tool for professional entertainment producers. Creators can use DreamFlare to make proofs of concept that will strengthen funding pitches and presentations for content made either on DreamFlare or by other means. Successful industry veterans who are struggling because of the recent strikes and the downturn in available financing can also use it to keep making (potentially revenue-generating) content, adds Liss.

DreamFlare's subscription streaming service launched in stealth mode in April 2023, and then opened up to the wider industry this past July 2024. It initially featured six hours of original proprietary content, and the company has been adding 50 to 75 new titles a month, including a handful of kid-skewing ones such as *Little Red & The Cursed Locket* (a retelling of the Little Red Riding Hood fairytale) and a Snow Queen adaptation called *The Ice Queen Chronicles*.

Interactivity comes through viewers being able to tap their screen and choose what happens next in the story. Imagine all of Netflix's content as *Bandersnatch*, and you'll get an idea of what DreamFlare is building.

The long-term goal is to grow this offering into a kids & family service, complete with a ratings system so families can find entertainment

Preschool series *Mixmups* is Channel 5's first foray into "ultra-access episodes" that let kids personalize how they watch the show, including lowering background noise, simplifying the visuals and adding content to enhance comprehension

that's appropriate for young viewers, and possibly stream interactive educational content.

To allay industry and consumer concerns about the type of output AI produces, DreamFlare's team curates everything and only accepts "top-quality" content, says Liss. In the short term, the company is looking for projects from established and talented creators.

DreamFlare offers a subscription model where some content is available for free every week, with a US$9.99 annual premium level that unlocks a wider library. Creators get a share of the revenue, and can also crowdfund their projects through the platform, which already has more than three million subscribers.

The company has raised US$1.65 million in a pre-seed round, but that funding is just the start. The hope is that the next big franchises to land major licensing and broadcast deals are born on DreamFlare, says Liss, drawing in viewers and generating ongoing revenue for the company.

"Producers can prove out concepts and [test-drive] the scripts that are sitting on their desks. We're an extension of the entertainment industry—not a replacement, but a new way to experience content."

THE FUTURE IS INTERACTIVE

As the founder and CEO of New York-based interactive content creator Adventr, Devo Harris imagines a future similar to the world in the movie *Minority Report*, where you can touch and talk to your content. But the key to making this possible is distribution, he says.

Adventr is solving for this by providing tools to produce interactive content, and by making sure its clients' creative work can be converted into formats that are shareable anywhere, including websites, social media and video players.

The company is already working with Disney Channel, Paramount and NBCUniversal. In the game *Disney Channel Besties*, kids choose which friends from various Disney Channel shows they want to see, and then watch clips featuring those characters. And in Paramount's interactive trailer for *Sonic The Hedgehog 2*, kids can choose their favorite character and make decisions for them.

Beyond just clicking the screen, the company took interactivity to a new level in a recent collaboration for NBCUniversal's series *The Voice*, allowing players to move a video forward by singing along with celebs such as John Legend (who is also an investor in Adventr).

Interactive TV is enabling what advertisers have been craving for the last decade—kids spending more time watching content and getting increasingly engaged with it, says Harris.

For the last six years, Adventr has been focused on the advertising industry because that sector has big budgets and quicker go-to-market timelines, he explains. It's also easier to quantify success in the ad business. For example, Adventr's interactive ads generate a 1,300% increase in click-throughs and 271% more time spent than static ads, he notes.

Seeing an actual return on investment makes paying for the technology and service a much easier proposition, especially for advertisers. Prices range from US$99 to US$300 per month, and there's a customized enterprise level, too.

Adventr is also creating original content (in part as a proof of concept), including a fully interactive feature film for kids that's currently in development. In 2022, the company produced an original 15-minute short film called Lab Rat. Using their smartphones, theater-goers were able to vote on plot choices, and the majority ruled to drive the story forward. The movie has since been played at festivals and conferences around the world, including SXSW Sydney, DC Black Film Festival and Dream Con in Texas.

Adventr's larger goal is to support businesses, including the kids TV industry, in either creating new content or adding interactivity to a back catalogue, adds Harris. "Young people expect to be able to interact with their content. We are enabling what we feel is inevitably coming—a future where all content is personalized for you." k

COOL NEW SHOWS MIPCOM EDITION

BY: RYAN TUCHOW & SADHANA BHARANIDHARAN

There's magic in the air at MIPCOM this year—or at least it feels that way, since so many new shows being pitched at market stands and cafés around Cannes have a mystical bent to them. Here are just a few that are hoping to cast a spell on buyers, distributors and (eventually) audiences.

5 to 8

Gilbert

Producer: Gaumont (France)
Style: CG animation
Format: 52 x 11 minutes
Budget: US$8 million to US$10 million
Status: A bible and a script written by Kris Marvin Hughes (*Stillwater, Alma's Way*) are available. There's also an animatic, an animation test from M2, and early artwork from Giant Animation. Gaumont is looking for broadcasters, distributors and financing.
Delivery: Q3 2027

Like plenty of kids, Gilbert the goblin loves being in his comfort zone—so much so that he thinks doing any new thing is just the worst. In each episode of this comedy-driven toon, Gilbert's friends encourage him to broaden his horizons and open up to new experiences. Planned storylines will see him meeting and making friends with his new neighbor, and abandoning his favorite seat in the bleachers to play in a pivotal game of "glitterball" that he helps his team win. The show is based on a five-book series written by Alex Willan and published by Simon & Schuster. Title number six, *Mermaids are the Worst!*, is due out in March 2025.

Best Boo

Producer: The Jim Henson Company (US)
Style: CG animation
Format: 26 x 11-minute series, plus a 30-minute Halloween special
Budget: US$6.5 million to US$7.5 million
Status: A bible and script are ready, and France's Superprod Animation is working on visual development, while Henson hunts for key commissioning and co-pro partners.
Delivery: 18 months after greenlight

Spooky cuteness abounds in this adaptation of Rebecca Green's illustrated kids book *How To Make Friends with a Ghost*, published by Tundra Books. In the quaint village of Boosboro, where every kid is matched with a ghost who becomes their lifelong companion, young Bellis and her adorable specter learn and grow together while discovering what positive friendships look like. The series models play patterns around nurturing and taking care of a pet. Lisa Henson and Halle Stanford are executive producing, and longtime Henson collaborator Ashley Griffis is attached as an EP and writer.

My Friend Maisy

Co-producers: Trustbridge Entertainment (US), BBC Studios Kids & Family (UK)
Style: 2D animation
Format: 52 x five minutes
Budget: US$8 million to US$9.3 million
Status: In pre-production, with talks underway with multiple potential broadcasters. BBC Studios Kids & Family is handling distribution.
Delivery: 2026/2027

Lucy Cousins' classic books about a friendly mouse named Maisy have sold more than 46 million copies since 1990. This is the IP's second screen adaptation, and it takes a decidedly more fantasy-forward approach under the experienced hand of head writer Matilda Tristram (*Peppa Pig*). Each snackable episode will blend the real and the surreal—much like a kid's imagination—whether it's Maisy creating a rainbow painting that comes to life, or meeting a zebra who takes her to a stripey world. The animation also echoes the trademark art style of the books, featuring bold brush strokes and slightly uneven lines. And in another nod to the publishing franchise it's based on, the show will feature "lift-the-flap" moments, such as the mouse lifting a leaf to be greeted by a worm.

Don't Walk Home Alone After Dark

Co-producers: Mercury Filmworks (Canada), La Chouette (France)
Style: 2D animation
Format: 12 x 13 minutes
Budget: Approximately US$3 million
Status: Two episodes are up on a same-name YouTube channel, with a pitch deck available, and an animatic for episode three in the works for MIPCOM.
Delivery: 15 months after greenlight

In this anthology series that blends coming-of-age stories with creepy suspense, kids come face to face with scary monsters. Created by *Hilda* director/producer Andy Coyle, *Don't Walk Home Alone After Dark* is based on a same-name YouTube channel that has racked up more than 200,000 subscribers and eight million views. One episode called "The Worm" has been watched more than 2.3 million times on the platform since rolling out in October 2023. Its teen protagonist tells a frightening story about being haunted by a mysterious invertebrate creature. Described by Mercury as a "suspenseful collection of modern folk tales," the show's episodes can either be watched independently or as a series—but maybe with the lights on.

Kiki Can Fly

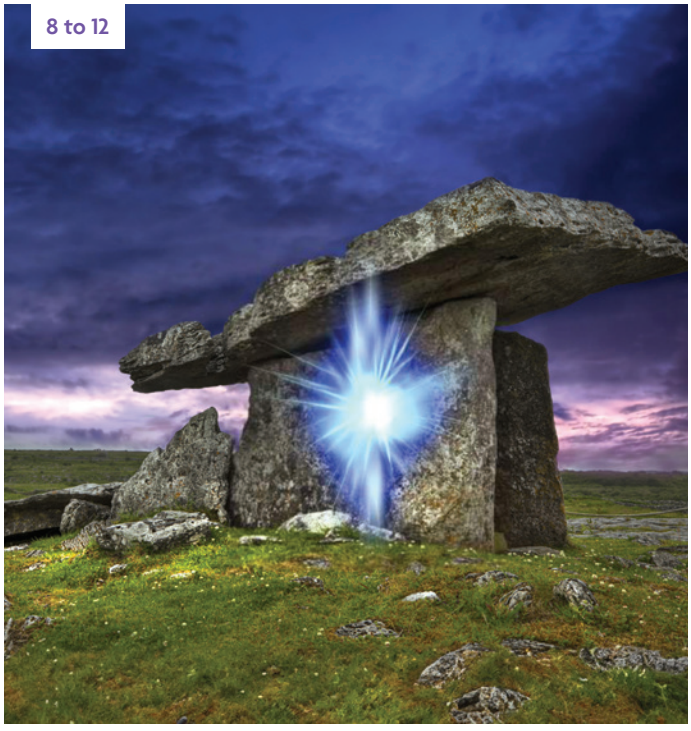
Producer: HooRoo Studio (Australia)
Style: 2D animation
Format: 20 x seven minutes
Budget: US$660,000
Status: Season one is complete and ready for distribution, with episodes available in English and French. Season two is in development, and HooRoo is seeking co-producers.
Delivery: Q3 2026

In each episode of this preschool series, Kiki—a bird who dreams of flying but can't—shows how perseverance, creative thinking and confidence are the keys to solving any problem. In one sample episode, a family trip to the ocean is threatened when the beach gets overcrowded. But Kiki, determined not to let the setback ruin her day, discovers a secret sandy cove where her family can make its own fun. Aussie Illustrator Murray Van created this series concept, and former ABC Australia head of kids content Michael Carrington is consulting with HooRoo on production and distribution through his new Carrington Media shingle.

Entre 2 Mundos

Producers: Ad Astra Media (US), Nuestro Stories (US)
Style: 2D animation
Format: 13 x 22 minutes
Budget: US$1.5 million to US$3 million
Status: A bible, a theme song and a handful of animation tests are ready, and the series' pilot script is written. Latino Alternative TV is lined up as a lead broadcaster.
Delivery: Q4 2025

Created by Marc Sanchez, this intricately diverse anime project revolves around three friends who must find their way back home after a magical artifact transports them into a world that's a mix of modern-day and ancient Mesoamerica. With a strategy to showcase Latino heritage, *Entre 2 Mundos* will draw from Mayan, Aztec, Incan and Taíno folklore, as well as South American, Afro-Caribbean and Central American culture. The show's title, which roughly translates to "between two worlds" in Spanish, describes the state of its protagonists, as well as the theme of code-switching—evident in dialogue that swings between English, Spanish, Nahuatl and other languages of the Latine diaspora. Emmy-winning animator and writer Jorge R. Gutierrez (*Maya and the Three*) is attached as an executive producer.



Yesterday's Girl

Co-producers: Tailored Films (Ireland), beActive Media (Portugal)
Style: Live action
Format: Eight x 25 minutes
Budget: US$2.2 million
Status: In development with Irish broadcaster TG4/Cúla4, this project is supported by Creative Europe. Its team is looking to meet with international broadcasters at MIPCOM, as well as investors/distributors.
Delivery: Spring 2026

Fresh off of delivering tween/teen drama *Louise Lives Large* to RTÉ earlier this year, Tailored Films is targeting the same demo with *Yesterday's Girl* (Irish title: *Ar Ais Arís*). In this live-action concept, history-obsessed Aodhan and his friends accidentally bring a young girl named Fiadh from the 11th century into present-day Ireland. They give her a 2020s makeover and help her navigate the strange new world she finds herself in, while working to recover a magic gemstone that will send Fiadh back to her own time. The series is banking hard on its time-travel hook, scenic Irish locations and a central love story that plays out between Fiadh and Aodhan. Tailored and beActive are also open to filming an English version in order to help the project appeal internationally.

BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

Come on, vámonos!

Nickelodeon's *Dora the Explorer* didn't just break the fourth wall when it debuted in 2000—it also broke new ground for representation in preschool television.

Created by Chris Gifford, Valerie Walsh Valdes and Eric Weiner, the show about a young Latina speaking directly to viewers in both English and Spanish evolved into a sprawling franchise with spinoffs, films, stage plays, video games and an estimated US$15 billion in retail sales.

Dora has something of a fragmented origin story, starting with various concepts that were developed in-house at Nick when it was trying to create the next big hit to follow *Blue's Clues* (1996). On the advice of then-preschool EVP Brown Johnson, Gifford and Valdes combined several pitches—including *The Knock Arounds* (about woodland creatures) and a girl-led concept called *Nina's Pop-up Puzzle*—into a more polished problem-solving premise featuring the character that would eventually become Dora.

"[She] was a red-haired girl with blue eyes at first," notes Gifford. But that look changed after Johnson attended a conference on TV's underrepresentation of Latine characters. Nick's president at the time Herb Scannell tasked the team (with Weiner newly on board) to change Nina into a Latina. Working closely with Spanish-language advisors and cultural consultants, and after making a trip to Costa Rica to steep themselves in local culture, the character evolved into the adventurer we know today as Dora.

In its initial 14-year run, *Dora the Explorer* built up a massive fanbase with its interactivity (inspired by CD-ROM games), catchy music and embrace of bilingualism. So it came as no surprise that Nick decided to revive the brand this year with Paramount+ series *DORA*. This CG-animated update alludes to Dora's specific heritage (her father is Mexican/Cuban and her mother is Peruvian) and has a faster pace to appeal to a slightly older demo, says Gifford. "It's more story-driven, much less of a gentle preschool show, and also a lot less predictable."—Sadhana Bharanidharan

Dora's bestie Boots was originally designed as a mouse to align with the show's computerized elements, before the team saw the appeal of turning him into a playful monkey pal

Dora the Explorer **emerged from a mash-up of early-stage concepts, including *Nina's Pop-up Puzzle*, in which the Nina character (who later became Dora) had red hair**

In one notable change to this year's CG-animated *DORA* reboot, her previously male sidekick Map is now a female character

FUN FACT

Team Dora fine-tuned the show's interactivity based on feedback from kids at test screenings. One result of this input was never letting viewers fail at completing Dora's tasks (such as saying "Swiper, no swiping" three times or making a paddling motion to move a boat), since failure led to disappointment and less motivation to attempt the next challenge.

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